Heart of Duramad

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The old cottage

The cottage nestled in the crook of two mossy hills looked half-swallowed by the land, its stone chimney puffing thin smoke into the grey morning. Inside, the smell of smoldering hearth and pipeweed hung heavy. Burmir, an old warrior of no small renown, sat hunched at a squat wooden table, a brass-bound pipe clenched between his teeth. The smoke curled about his braided beard as he studied a brittle parchment map, corners browned by years and stained with grease. His thick fingers traced a faded ink line snaking toward a mark labeled “Kolgrimm’s Hollow” near Dragonspear village. His eyes, dark as coal and lined by many winters, squinted with the kind of curiosity that often got dwarves either rich or dead.

A heavy swig of dark mead sloshed past his lips, his beard catching some of the foam. He set the tankard down with a satisfying thud and stood. With a grunt, he grabbed a hatchet from the wall and stepped outside into the soft mud of his garden, where a chicken clucked too loudly for its own good. One swift stroke ended its song. He returned to the hearth, plucked and gutted the bird, and set it turning on an iron spit over open flame. Carrots, onions, and a fistful of wild herbs were chopped with the same care one might give to carving runes. When the skin turned crisp and golden, he tore off a haunch and dipped it into the thick gravy pooling at the bottom of the pan, washing it down with more mead until his belly was round and warm.

After wiping grease from his hands, Burmir went to the weapon rack in the corner. There stood his armor, dark steel etched with runes, and beside it, a broad-headed spear that had once skewered a cave troll through the eye. He sat cross-legged and began the quiet ritual of care. Straps were tightened or replaced, the chestplate rubbed with oil and buffed until the old dents shimmered with polish. When done, he stood, tested the weight, and made a single

sweeping lunge toward a boar's head mounted on the wall. The spear pierced it clean through the snout and into the wooden paneling behind. He gave a pleased grunt and withdrew the blade.

From a shelf he packed his roughspun backpack—twisting in dried meat, a wedge of cheese, two healing potions in glass-stoppered flasks, a long coil of rope, flint knife, waterskin, his pipe and a pouch of good pipeweed from the trader who came through last autumn. Into a coin pouch he counted out twenty-five silver pieces, tucked them beneath the food, and fastened the bag closed.

By the time the sun was bleeding gold through the clouds, Burmir stepped out beneath it in full armor, pack over one shoulder and spear in hand. Just as he passed the stone wall of his yard, a voice hailed him.

"Off early, are you, Burmir?" came the sound of Ilda, a broad-shouldered dwarf woman in a leather apron, sweeping dust from her porch.

He tipped his helm with a grin. "Aye, Ilda. Found somethin' that needs diggin' into. Might be gone a few weeks."

"Don't go off chasin' shadows, you old ox."

"If I don't come back with somethin' shiny, I'll bring back a good story," he replied.

"Just don't bring back lice."

They both chuckled. Then, with the ease of a man who had done it a hundred times before, Burmir turned toward the hills beyond the village and walked into the morning fog, the faint scent of pipeweed trailing behind him.

The sun rolled slowly westward as Burmir trudged over low, grassy hills that undulated like old sea waves. His boots sank slightly into the earth, damp from spring's thaw, and his steps were steady, unhurried. Now and then he paused to glance at the map, though he knew these lands well enough to walk them blindfolded. His people once lived deeper in the stone, but these outer lands were where he'd grown up—running barefoot through the fields, chasing badgers, digging hopeful holes into soft earth, convinced gold was but a foot deeper. He never found it, of course. These hills were small and humble, like their folk.

By late afternoon, a thin stream cut across his path, its water laughing softly over rounded stones. Burmir knelt, filled his waterskin, and splashed a handful over his face. The cold bite of it startled a grunt from him, but it felt good. He drank deep, wiped his beard with a sleeve, and turned to gather some fallen branches nearby. He found a mix of birch and pine, dry enough, and added a bundle of old grass from the sunlit patch near the streambank. With a practiced flick of his flintstone, a spark caught the grass and a small flame grew beneath the twigs.

The fire crackled warmly as he stretched out nearby on a bed of moss and grass, thick and soft under his back. The sun was low but still golden, casting long beams through the sparse birch trees. He stuck a straw in his mouth, chewing it absently while reaching into his pack. A wedge of cheese came out, dense and sharp, and he broke off a chunk with his teeth.

Birdsong drifted around him—shrill trills, some low whistles, and the occasional croak from a marshbird deeper in the valley. Then, with a quick motion, Burmir leaned over the stream, dipped in his hand, and came up with a small fish that had strayed too close. With a practiced rip, he removed the head and tossed it into the brush. The fish was spitted on a thin branch and turned slowly over the fire. The smell of crisping skin filled the air.

A deer passed by not ten paces from the fire, its large eyes meeting his. Burmir watched it go, raising his eyebrows in mild surprise, but didn't move. He was too full and too tired to be chasing venison today. He grunted again, washed his hands and face in the cold stream, and then sank back onto the moss.

He struck a match and lit his pipe, puffing gently, letting the smoke rise and blend with the woodfire's. The hills felt familiar, even safe. He remembered being a boy here, digging little holes into the side of a slope with a rusted pickaxe, convinced the gods had buried treasure just beneath his reach. He'd found a broken horseshoe once. That was about as rich as the hills ever got.

The pipe bobbed once more between his teeth before falling to his chest. His eyes grew heavy. The fire crackled softly, the birds still chirped, and Burmir, belly full and heart content, drifted into a deep sleep beneath the setting sun.

Burmir woke with a dry mouth and stiff back, the fire reduced to a quiet pile of ash and blackened twigs. The sky had lightened to a pale orange, and the birds were already busy with their songs. He sat up with a grunt, brushed a beetle from his beard, and stretched his limbs until the joints popped. The grass beneath him was dewy and cool. He stood, slapped dust from his trousers, and reached for his backpack. The knife found its home in the right boot, the pipe was tucked between his teeth, and with a few puffs of smoke curling into the crisp morning air, Burmir set off again.

The path wound through the hills, which now seemed a touch more rugged. Stone jutted from the ground in places like old teeth, and underfoot a narrow trail of flat, weather-worn slabs hinted at ancient travel long before either dwarves or men. He moved with a steady, unhurried gait, whistling a low tune and spitting now and then into the grass, the pipe clenched loosely in his mouth. The wind picked up faintly as the sun climbed higher.

By midday, as he rounded a bend between two ridges, he spotted a familiar figure ahead. A stout dwarf, bald except for thick sideburns, tugged along a shaggy donkey burdened with panniers stuffed full—bundles of cloth, jugs wrapped in straw, and the unmistakable scent of pipe tobacco and dried herbs wafting in the air.

"Oi! Burmir, you old stump!" called Ulik, grinning under his wild mustache.

Burmir raised a hand in greeting. "Well, look at that. If it ain't the merchant king of the mud roads."

Ulik laughed and wiped his brow. "You off to murder another rabid wolf, eh? Whole village still talkin' about the last one you chopped in half."

Burmir chuckled, the pipe bobbing. "Nay. Off to see if there's truth in a map and madness in me. Got a mark on it that smells like treasure."

Ulik eyed him with mock seriousness. "You sure it ain't an old wine stain?"

"Could be," Burmir admitted. "But if I find a barrel down there, I'll toast you first."

With a grin, Ulik unfastened a small keg from his donkey's side and pulled the cork. "Here, none of that thin village brew. Try this—got it off a fella near Yartar. Blacker than tar and hits like a troll's hug."

They sat on a flat stone by the road, passing the jar back and forth. The ale was bitter, strong, and full of a smoky depth that made Burmir sigh with every gulp.

"So," Ulik said, wiping his mouth, "you reckon there's still treasure in these hills? Thought your folk dug 'em bare a century back."

"Aye," Burmir said, "but Kolgrimm's Hollow—now that's a place no one's dared poke around in proper. Old traps, maybe curses, goblin bones. Sounds promising."

Ulik raised an eyebrow. "Or maybe you just got tired of peace and quiet."

"Could be," Burmir said. "Besides, if I don't find treasure, I'll settle for a decent cave nap."

They laughed hard at that, the kind of laugh that only comes from too much ale and too many shared stories. Hours passed like minutes. Eventually, the jar was empty and the sun hung lower in the sky.

"Well," Ulik said, standing and groaning, "I better get to Llorkh or the wife'll think I fell into a ditch."

Burmir clasped his friend's arm. "Safe roads. Give my regards to the tavern."

"Will do. And if you find that treasure, don't forget who gave you the courage to chase it!"

Burmir waved as Ulik and his donkey turned down the stone path. Then, with the sun still warm on his back and a pleasant heaviness in his limbs, he slung his pack once more and resumed his trek toward Kolgrimm’s Hollow, the laughter still echoing faintly behind him.

The sun had dipped behind the hills, leaving the sky awash in purple and ash. Burmir walked with slower steps now, the soft slap of his boots against stone echoing through the quiet. The moon crested above, full and pale, bathing the land in cold silver light. Crickets had begun their nightly tune, and the pipe’s ember flared with each puff as Burmir scanned for a place to settle.

But his steps halted.

Down the narrow footpath ahead, just where the shadows thickened between two stones, a figure emerged. A man, tall and cloaked in a patchwork of leather and rags, sauntered forward with a crooked grin. His eyes glittered like a rat’s under the moonlight.

“Well, well,” the man drawled, arms swinging lazily. “Look what crawled out from under a rock. You're about the size of my boy—seven years old and twice as hairy.”

Burmir didn’t slow his pace. He squinted, chewing on the pipe stem. “Didn’t take you for the type who could raise anything besides suspicion.”

The man’s grin faltered, then twisted into a sneer. “Hand over your coin, stump. Maybe I’ll let you limp away.”

Burmir stopped, slowly set his pack down, and laughed—deep and rough, the kind that carried a hint of thunder.

Then he lunged.

The dwarf moved faster than the man expected. One sweeping motion from the butt of the spear cracked against the man's shin, sending him sprawling onto the stony path. Dust kicked up as he hit the ground, but he recovered quickly, rising with a roar and drawing a notched sword. Burmir aimed for the thigh and struck true—his spearhead punched through flesh and into bone, making the man howl and stagger backward, blood darkening his trousers.

But pain fueled fury. The man raised his sword high and brought it crashing down. It smashed into Burmir's helmet with a brutal clang that echoed across the hills. The blow knocked the dwarf to one knee, stars bursting behind his eyes, and his pipe clattered away into the grass. The man pressed his advantage, hacking downward again and again, forcing Burmir back. Sparks flew from his helm, and blood began to run down the side of his face.

But Burmir was no stranger to pain.

With a grunt and a sudden twist, he rolled aside from the next swing, came up low, and drove his shoulder into the man's gut. As the human stumbled backward, Burmir surged forward with both hands gripping his spear. The tip plunged through the man's jaw, up through the roof of his mouth, and into his skull. There was a hideous crack and a shudder, then silence.

The man fell like a sack of wet meat.

Burmir stood over him, panting. Blood dripped from his brow, and the spear was wedged tight in the man's skull. He gritted his teeth, set one foot on the corpse's chest, and gave a hard wrench. The sound it made was awful—wet and grinding—but the weapon came free with a final tug.

He wiped it clean on the dead man's cloak, rolled the body with a heavy boot, and watched it tumble down the hill until it vanished into the brush. Then he found his pipe, dusted it off, lit it again with trembling hands, and took a deep drag.

"A fool's death," he muttered, voice rough.

From his pack he took a healing potion and gulped it down, wincing as the warmth surged through his chest and the bleeding slowed. A mile further on, he found a flat patch of grass beneath an old twisted tree, the branches gnarled like sleeping hands. He dropped his pack, laid his cloak out, and slumped down, the fatigue settling into his bones.

He slept through the night without dreams, the moon keeping silent watch above him.

The morning came soft and golden, the dew still clinging to the grass like tiny beads of glass. Burmir rose with a stretch and a grunt, brushing bits of twig and leaf from his beard. His body still ached from the fight, a deep soreness in his shoulders and ribs, but it was the kind of pain that made him feel alive. He lit his pipe and took a few thoughtful puffs, the ember glowing gently in the morning light, and then he set his boots once more on the narrow footpath winding through the hills.

By midday, the path opened onto a breathtaking view—a broad, still lake lay before him, its surface glassy and calm, reflecting the bright blue sky. A fox sat motionless in the tall grass

nearby, eyeing him with quiet curiosity. Butterflies flitted lazily through the warm air, dancing above the water's edge. Burmir gave a low whistle of appreciation, dropped his pack, and began unbuckling his armor, piece by piece. It clanked as it hit the ground, leaving him in his shirt and breeches. With a gleam in his eye, he stepped into the water and waded out, diving in with a splash.

The lake was cold in the best way—sharp and bracing, like a good slap after a night of drinking. He dove to the bottom, bubbles rising from his beard as he reached for handfuls of long green weeds and a cluster of mussels clinging to a stone. When he emerged, he was gasping and grinning, water dripping from his thick eyebrows. He settled on a smooth stone near the shore, opened the mussels with his knife, and chewed on them alongside the weeds. The meal was simple and briny, but good.

Burmir gazed out across the lake, the sunlight dancing on the water like silver sparks. He imagined what lay ahead—gold, ancient relics, maybe even a crown. A hall of his own, roaring hearth, stone walls lined with polished shields. Maybe even a forge where he could hammer steel and sip mead without worry. The thought of it brought a slow smile to his face.

With a grunt of effort, he donned his armor again, piece by piece, and built a small fire with driftwood from the shore. He sat cross-legged beside it and pulled out the old map. Its surface was soft with wear, the ink faded but still legible. But something caught his eye this time—on the back, half-torn and almost missed, was a line of writing in curling script:

"Beneath where dragon's shadow dies,
In ash of stone and starlit cries,
Speak not with tongue, but silence keep,
And gold shall wake from ageless sleep."

Burmir frowned and turned it over in his hands, reading it again. He muttered, "Starlit cries? What's that supposed to mean? And silence—what kind of riddle tells you to shut up?"

He shook his head, folded the map, and tucked it back into his pack. Then, with a bit of mussel flesh still leftover, he tied it to a thin cord with a small hook he always carried and tossed it into the lake. Before long, the line gave a sharp tug, and he pulled in a glimmering silver fish. With practiced ease, he cleaned it, skewered it, and roasted it over the fire. The smell was rich and savory, and he devoured it with a satisfied grunt.

After the meal, he took his spear and sat on a rock, sharpening its edge with a small flat stone he carried for just such moments. The metal sang with each stroke. When the blade was gleaming and keen once more, he laid back in the grass beside his gear.

The sky above was clear, the clouds moving slow and lazy. Burmir watched them drift like ships in an endless blue sea. The smoke from his pipe curled upward toward them, and the world seemed, if only for a moment, utterly still.

The sun had begun to dip low again, casting long golden fingers across the still waters of the lake. The fire crackled quietly, and Burmir, sitting with his back against a tree trunk, pipe in mouth and belly comfortably full, was drifting in that sweet space between alertness and sleep when a voice piped up from the path.

“Good day to ya, master dwarf! Any luck with the fishin’?”

Burmir opened one eye and turned his head. Standing at the edge of the grass was a halfling no taller than Burmir’s waist, with a small leather hat, a round, sun-browned face, and a small hatchet in his hand. He had a short fishing rod with him and wore a small leather armor with far too many pockets.

“Caught one earlier,” Burmir said, removing the pipe and nodding toward the fire. “Ate it already. Decent meat. Should still be plenty swimming about though.”

“Lovely!” the halfling said, bounding over. “Name’s Imbr. Been walkin’ these parts all day. Saw the lake and thought, now there’s a place a fella can rest his feet and maybe snag a supper.”

Burmir reached into his pack and pulled out one of the leftover mussels. “Try this. Got me a fine fish earlier.”

Imbr’s eyes lit up. “Ah, fine bait! Thank’ee!”

He set to work with the mussel, cast his line into the lake, and within minutes had pulled in a wriggling silver fish. He cleaned it deftly and laid it over the fire, the smell soon drawing Burmir’s full attention.

“I reckon we share,” Imbr said with a grin. “Fair trade for the bait.”

Burmir, never one to refuse good food, accepted and tore off a chunk of the fish. “So what brings you out to this quiet spot? Bit far from any halfling burrow, isn’t it?”

“Oh, a tale in that,” Imbr chuckled. “Was passin’ through Daggerford last week, and there’s this big lad in the market—half-orc, smells like a barn, sells ‘exotic meats.’ I asked him if he had rabbit. He says, ‘Aye, fresh.’ Well, I cook it up that night and guess what? Tasted funny. I go back next day, ask him straight—he says, ‘Mighta been possum.’ I tell him I want my coin back, and he says, ‘You’ll have to take it from my boot.’ I says, ‘Fair enough.’ So I cut the strap off his boot while he was sleepin’ drunk behind his stall and took a pouch of dried sausages as interest.”

Burmir roared with laughter, nearly choking on a mouthful of fish. “You’re a cheeky rat, Imbr.”

The halfling shrugged with a wink. “One must adapt.”

They passed the wine-sack between them, and Burmir took a long draw, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. As they leaned back and watched the sky shift into deep blue and pink, he gave the halfling a thoughtful glance.

“How is it,” Burmir asked, “that you wee folk manage to roam about wild hills and roads and not end up as wolf meat or bandit bait?”

Imbr grinned and patted the small axe strapped across his back. “I keep off the main roads, and when I do travel, I walk light and quiet. But if someone comes close, I’ve got a fine little trick—aim for the legs. Most folk don’t think a halfling’s goin’ to take your knees out, but I’m quick with the bite.”

Burmir let out a fresh round of laughter, slapping his thigh. “Leg-cutter, eh? Remind me not to sleep too close if you start dreamin’ wild.”

They both laughed until their sides ached, the fire crackling beside them and the lake calm and silver under the rising stars. It was a rare kind of night—where strangers became kin by story and flame.

The dawn light spilled across the lake like a spilled cup of milk, catching dew on the grass and painting the world gold. Burmir stirred early, rising with a content grunt. The fire was now just a ring of ash, and Imbr still snored softly under his blanket, one foot poking out. Burmir packed up quietly, not one for drawn-out goodbyes, but before he left he left a strip of dried meat beside the halfling's bag, muttered, "Watch them knees, leg-cutter," and set off down the footpath.

The trail followed the river's edge as it curved eastward, threading through the rolling hills and marshy flats of the High Moor. The days blurred with wind and shifting weather—gray skies one morning, then bright sun by noon, the grass always bending, never still. He passed gnarled trees bent from storms, saw distant hawks circling, and once caught the scent of smoke and iron from what might've been a distant forge far off the path. By the third day, Burmir's feet were sore and his stomach grumbled like a waking bear.

And then, just before dusk, he saw the sign swaying gently from a crooked post: *The Tiny Mouse Inn*. It looked like the kind of place that had survived by being too small to bother raiding, with ivy climbing its stone walls and a crooked chimney puffing warm smoke. Burmir pushed open the door and was hit with the rich smell of meat, smoke, and ale.

Inside, it was cozy and alive with quiet music—a bard sat near the hearth, strumming a lute and singing some gentle tune about lost love and full tankards. Six tables filled the room, occupied by a quiet, mixed company: a trio of elves murmured in one corner over tea, two halflings argued over a game of cards, and a gruff dwarf in a green cloak was halfway through a pork shank. Deer and boar heads lined the walls, some with comically small hats perched atop them, and the floor was patched with old boar hides.

Burmir dropped his pack by a table and thumped down into a chair. "Meat and potatoes," he growled to the barkeep, "and a proper dark ale."

The innkeeper, an elf woman with the roundest cheeks Burmir had ever seen and a crown of curly brown hair, nodded and gave him a grin. Her arms were long—absurdly long, in fact—and she seemed to grab a mug from a high shelf, fill it with ale, toss a loaf of bread into a basket, and flip a ladle of stew all without moving her feet. Everything behind the counter had clearly been arranged to fit within her strange reach.

While the food was cooking, she came over with the ale and leaned slightly, her hand already filling another mug two meters away. "You're lucky you didn't stop by last week," she said with a chuckle. "We had a visit from an orc. Dead drunk, convinced the inn was run by a literal mouse. Kept shouting he wanted to duel the 'tiny beast for dominance.' When no mouse showed, he declared the bard must be the mouse in disguise, and then... well, let's just say the boar heads got one more crack at combat."

Burmir laughed so hard he almost choked on his drink. "Wish I'd seen that. Did the bard win?"

"He hid under the table," she said. "Smartest one in the room."

Soon, a steaming plate of meat and potatoes was in front of him. Burmir dug in with gusto, savoring every bite, listening to the lute and the quiet murmur of fellow travelers. The fire roared gently in the hearth, casting flickering shadows across the mounted heads and mugs on the tables.

This place was a refuge, an island of warmth on the edge of wild lands—and though he wouldn't stay long, Burmir was glad to have found it.

Burmir dropped the coins on the counter with a thick clink of silver, grunted a thank-you toward the long-armed elf behind the bar, and lumbered upstairs to his rented room. The wooden door creaked as he shut it behind him, and he dropped his gear in a heap near the bed. He didn't even bother pulling off his boots before collapsing onto the straw-stuffed mattress. The warmth of a full belly and the lingering buzz of ale wrapped him like a blanket, and sleep came swift and deep.

When morning arrived, light filtered in through the cracked shutters. Burmir groaned, sat up, and rubbed the crust from his eyes. He made his way to the inn's washing room, splashed water over his face and beard until he felt something like alive again, then marched to the lavatory and took his time, emerging with a look of grim satisfaction.

Downstairs, the tavern smelled even better than it had the night before. Bacon, onions, and fresh bread. He took his usual table near the hearth and ordered a plate stacked high with food and four mugs of dark ale. When it all arrived, he tore into it like a starving wolf, downing the ale with great gulps until a massive croak burst from his throat, echoing through the inn like the bark of an ogre.

From the side, a voice called out, rough but feminine, “By the gods, do you always announce yourself like that, or is this a special occasion?”

Burmir looked up and saw a human woman sliding into the seat across from him. She was thin, weatherworn, her cloak threadbare and patched. Her dress was little more than rags, and her boots had clearly seen too many miles. She carried a belt lined with small glass bottles, bundles of dried herbs, and pouches that clinked softly when she moved. Her chestnut hair was tangled and partially tucked under a worn hood, and a few teeth were missing when she smiled—but her eyes held a spark, and she moved like someone who knew how to stay on her feet.

“Name’s Inandra,” she said. “Healer, trader of herbs and potions... part-time dodger of bandits and other disappointments.”

Burmir gave a snort and wiped ale from his beard. “Burmir. Warrior, eater of meat, piercer of skulls. You sell potions, eh?”

“When I can,” she said, gesturing at her belt. “Chamomile, mandrake, silverleaf, and a few things the elves don’t want me to name. Good for wounds, fever, sleeplessness... or chasing bad spirits out of the guts.”

Burmir chuckled. “Sounds like half of that’s useful and the rest’s for village folk who think a sneeze is a curse.”

“Sometimes fear needs healing more than the wound,” Inandra replied, her voice low. “But truth is, it’s getting harder. Roads are dangerous, and most towns don’t trust a woman in rags peddling draughts from the woods. I’ve slept in haylofts more than beds lately.”

Burmir frowned and looked at her a moment. “You’ve got dirt under your nails and scars on your arms. You’ve earned your path.”

She smiled, lopsided and tooth-gapped. “Well, that’s something, I suppose.”

He dug into his coin pouch, pulled out a few silvers, and dropped them on the table. “I’ll take two of your healing potions. One for the next fool who stabs me, and one in case it’s me who trips on a loose stone like a drunken goat.”

She chuckled, unhooked two small bottles sealed with wax, and slid them across the table. “You’ve got a strange kindness, Burmir.”

He took the potions and tucked them into his pack. “Don’t spread that around. I’ve a reputation to maintain.”

Their laughter mingled with the clink of mugs and the strum of the bard’s lute as the fire crackled behind them, and outside, the wind shifted gently across the moor.

Burmir stepped out of the Tiny Mouse Inn with a satisfied belly and a faint buzz warming his bones. The midday sun had begun its slow tilt westward, casting long shadows across the barren stretch of moorland before him. The hills had faded behind, and the landscape grew harsher—gnarled, half-dead trees stood like ancient skeletons, and the wind carried with it a dry, whispering bite. He walked at a steady pace, pipe clenched between his teeth, boots crunching over gravel and dry roots.

The distant line of the Dragonspear still loomed far off. He had ground to cover, and the road was quiet—too quiet.

After some time, as the sun began its slow dip, three figures emerged ahead. Human shapes, cloaked and staggered across the path like wolves testing the wind. Burmir squinted. They weren’t travelers. Not with the way they walked.

He muttered under his breath, “Of all the damned days... four ales too many.”

The bandits approached with greasy smiles and eyes full of mischief. One had a rusted helmet, another wore a chainmail vest over bare arms, and the third, taller than the rest, carried a chipped axe and a permanent sneer.

“Where you headed, old stump?” the tallest one asked, stepping close. “Nice armor you got there. Shine like that draws the wrong kind of attention.”

Another snorted. “And that spear? Reckon you might want to gift that away before it gets bent.”

Burmir didn’t speak. He just looked from one to the other, jaw clenched, grip tightening on his spear. He sighed once and spat to the side.

Then he moved.

The spear punched clean through the chest of the bandit in front, the iron tip bursting out the man’s back in a red spray. Burmir pulled it out with a grunt and turned as the second came at him with a club. A low, sweeping arc of the spear knocked the man off his feet, his legs flipping out from under him with a bone-jarring crunch.

The third, the leader, let out a snarl and came in hard, swinging his axe overhead. The blade crashed down on Burmir’s shoulder, denting the armor and sending a shock through his frame. Pain flared as the force of it slammed him to one knee. The edge of the axe had slipped and caught his cheek, tearing open a gash that bled freely. He growled, stood back up, and took another cut across his thigh—a shallow but vicious slice.

The bandit grinned, thinking he had the upper hand.

But Burmir’s fury was an old, patient thing.

With a roar, he drove forward, taking the hit to his armor, closing the space. The spear thrust up through the bandit’s gut, piercing muscle, organ, and bone. The man gasped, choked, and staggered as Burmir wrenched the spear free sideways, ripping entrails loose with it. Blood sprayed across the dirt road in a wide arc.

Silence returned. Only the wind remained.

Burmir stood amidst the bodies, blood dripping from his cheek and leg, spear dark and wet. He rolled one of the corpses with his boot and found a small coin pouch—five silver pieces, warm from the dead man's last moments.

He wiped his spear on the tunic of the first man he'd skewered, spat again, and limped forward. The Dragonspear Mountains still waited, and Burmir had no plans of dying before he found what lay buried in Kolgrimm's Hollow.

Another day's march beneath the cloud-streaked sky brought Burmir to the edge of the Dragonspear region. The familiar scent of the land—old trees, mossy stone, and faint hints of woodsmoke from the distant village—filled his lungs. The peaks of the mountains loomed closer now, jagged and grey, shadows stretching across the earth. He paused on a rise, unrolled the old map again, and traced his thick finger across it. "Kolgrimm's Hollow," he muttered, eyes narrowing. According to the faded ink, it should be nestled in a grove not far from where he stood.

He followed the land's subtle curves, moved past a cluster of ancient oaks, and soon entered a grove of low, twisted trees where the air felt heavier, like breath held too long. For two long hours, he searched—hands brushing through brush, eyes sharp for anything unnatural in this place of nature. And then he saw it: a pile of stones, weather-worn and half-sunken into the earth, but distinctly placed. Not natural. A landmark.

"This better be it," he grumbled.

Dragonspear

Burmir turned and made his way to the nearby village of Dragonspear, where after a bit of bartering and a few suspicious glances, he secured a worn but sturdy shovel from an old tool merchant. With the shovel over his shoulder and determination in his bones, he returned to the grove, the shadows now longer and the air stiller.

He set to digging.

The ground was unkind. Packed earth and thick with stone. The shovel struck rock as often as it struck soil, and each blow echoed with a muffled curse. "Damn this ground," he growled, sweat stinging his eyes. He paused often, wiping his brow, sipping from his waterskin, but the fire of curiosity burned hotter than the sun above.

After nearly an hour, the shovel struck something different. Not stone. Not root. Wood.

Burmir froze, eyes widening slightly. Then he grunted in approval. "Aha."

He dropped to his knees, clawing away the dirt until the chest was fully uncovered—small, wooden, its surface etched with delicate carvings that time had only just begun to eat away. The metal lock was rusted but still whole. He wrapped one end of his rope around it, climbed out of the pit, and began to haul.

The chest was lighter than expected. Suspiciously so.

Once on solid ground, Burmir studied the engravings briefly—circular patterns, old runes, maybe even a ward or two. None of them meant a damn to him in that moment. He raised the butt of his spear and smashed the lock until it gave way with a snapping crack.

He flipped open the lid.

Empty.

The silence of the grove deepened around him.

Burmir stared for a moment. Then his mouth twisted.

“Mother of the retarded pigs,” he spat, voice thick with contempt.

He stood, gave the chest a good kick, and then began the walk back toward Dragonspear, shovel over one shoulder. His boots thudded against the ground with the weight of tired disappointment. But his eyes were still sharp.

The sun hung low behind the ridges as Burmir trudged into Dragonspear village, his boots dragging slightly in the dust. The disappointment still burned like bad stew in his gut. He found the elf who’d lent him the shovel—a wiry fellow with a suspicious brow and calloused fingers—and tossed him a silver piece without a word. The elf caught it, raised an eyebrow, and said nothing. That suited Burmir just fine.

He made for the tavern, muttering under his breath, “All this damned walkin’... all that diggin’... for an empty box. Bah. The god of Duramir must’ve stuffed his ears with moss and turned his back on me.”

The tavern’s name, predictably, was *The Dragonspear*. No points for originality, Burmir thought as he shoved open the door. Inside was a low-lit room with a handful of round tables, a few scattered patrons nursing ales and chewing over their long days. He sank into a

shadowy corner, his armor clinking softly, and waved over the innkeeper—a squat man with a crooked nose and eyes like tired marbles.

“Two dark ales,” Burmir growled.

The mugs arrived soon enough, and he downed them like a dying man finding water. The ale was strong, gritty, and honest. The tavern's warmth settled over him, and for a time, the ache in his leg and the sting of failure dulled.

Suddenly – screams started.

At first, it was distant—shouts, the clatter of hooves, then high-pitched cries, the kind that tear through bone. Burmir sat up straighter. A figure sprinted past the window, cloak flapping, then another, and another. Screams grew louder. Then he saw them—bandits, a score at least, pouring into the village with torches in hand and steel drawn, chasing the fleeing townsfolk like wolves after deer.

Burmir's eyes narrowed. He rose slowly, his hand tightening around his spear. “What in the frozen hells...?”

Another scream. Then firelight flickering against the window panes. He saw villagers falling, buildings catching flame. His mouth curled into a snarl, but he knew the truth—this was no fight he could win alone.

He let out a furious, wild croak that shook the walls and rattled mugs on nearby tables. Some tavern-goers screamed, others ran.

Burmir turned, boots thundering against the wooden floor, and kicked open the tavern door with a crack. The heat of the fires hit him immediately, the air thick with smoke and chaos. He didn't wait to be spotted. He ran, low and fast, ducking behind a hay cart, darting past a burning stall, until he reached the nearest house still intact.

He burst through the door and found the cellar hatch. Down he went, closing it behind him. The smell of earth and old potatoes filled the air. He crouched in the darkness, back against the cold stone wall, every muscle tense. His spear rested tight in his hands, knuckles white around the shaft.

Silence slowly settled around him. Distant chaos still roared outside, but down here, it was still, like the inside of a tomb.

Burmir's breath slowed. His thoughts churned. He was no coward—but he was no fool. A lone dwarf couldn't take on a horde. Not yet.

He'd wait.

The cellar was still and heavy, each breath seeming louder than it should. Burmir sat in the dark, his back to the wall, his spear resting across his knees, his ears tuned to every noise above. The muffled roar of fire had quieted to a dull hiss, like dying embers licking the edges of the world. Then—footsteps.

The hatch creaked open and a dark shape dropped through it in a rush. A burly dwarf landed in a heap, rolled, and came up with an axe in hand, snarling, "Who the damn are you?"

Burmir raised his hands slightly, not moving from his place. “Name’s Burmir. I ran from the tavern when the raid started. Not lookin’ for trouble—just waitin’ it out, same as you.”

The other dwarf stared for a breath longer, eyes gleaming in the faint light that filtered through the gaps in the floor above. Then his shoulders loosened, and he dropped his axe beside him with a grunt. “Hager,” he said. “From the edge of the village. Bastards burned my forge. Nearly cooked me in it.”

Burmir scooted aside, giving him space to sit. “You're lucky you made it out with beard unburned.”

“Wouldn’t say that. Got singed proper.” Hager’s deep voice rumbled low as he adjusted his leather armor and wiped soot from his brow. His beard was indeed black as coal, though a few strands were still smoking faintly.

Silence settled again, thick and brooding. Then the hatch creaked once more.

Two figures dropped in quick succession, graceful but tense. They landed lightly, their cloaks brushing the dirt, and spun to face the two dwarves. One had a bow drawn, the other raised a hand crackling faintly with magic.

Burmir raised his hands quickly. “Easy now—it’s all right! We won’t hurt you!”

The taller of the two, a striking elf with black hair and sigil marked robes, narrowed her eyes, lowering her hand just slightly. “You’re not with the bandits?”

“If we were,” Hager grumbled, “you’d already be pin-cushioned and burnt.”

The second elf, brown of hair and clad in worn leather armor, lowered her bow, though her eyes stayed sharp. “Then we’re the same. Escaping.”

They slowly crossed the cellar and crouched in a corner. The black-haired one spoke softly. “I am Eloanil, cleric of Sehanine. This is Mithri, a warrior of the woodlands.”

“I’m Burmir, that’s Hager,” Burmir said. “Looks like we’ve got ourselves a fine mix of folk hiding from the same problem.”

Mithri glanced at the ceiling. “There are dozens of them. I counted near thirty when we passed the outer fields. Most on foot, some with horses. A few... not entirely human.”

“Mercenaries,” Hager spat. “Maybe worse.”

“They came swift and brutal,” Eloanil added. “No warning. Just flame and blood.”

Burmir rubbed the cut on his cheek, dried now into a dark line. “There’s no fighting them all. Not with four in a cellar.”

“But we can’t stay here forever,” Mithri said, voice tight. “They’re searching house to house. It’s only a matter of time.”

“There might be a way,” Burmir said slowly, tapping his spear’s shaft against the floor. “Wait till night. When their blood cools and their bellies are full of stolen wine. Then we sneak out the back of this rat hole, find the ones who made it, gather them, and plan proper.”

Hager grunted in agreement. “Aye. But if I see the one who lit my forge, I’m planting my axe in his throat.”

Eloanil looked at them all with calm eyes, voice soft but sure. “Then let us survive the night. And when dawn comes, we rise from this cellar not as prey... but as the start of resistance.”

The cellar fell quiet again, but now, the silence hummed with something else—shared purpose, forged in fire and fear.

The cellar was thick with stillness, the kind that made each breath sound like thunder in the ears. For hours the group remained silent, barely shifting, the air heavy with smoke and fear. Above them, the crackle of burning thatch and the far-off screams of the dying and the fleeing painted a grim backdrop. Burmir sat with his spear across his knees, his eyes half-lidded but never drifting into true rest. Hager leaned against a keg, arms crossed, while Eloanil sat in quiet prayer and Mithri listened keenly at the cellar hatch, bow ready in her hands.

Then came the footsteps—heavy, careless, and close. The boards above groaned. A moment later, the hatch creaked open, sending a narrow beam of firelit orange into the dark.

Two figures dropped down with thuds, both armed and grimy, swords already drawn.

“There you are,” one spat, his teeth yellow and broken. “Rats in a hole. Cut their throats.”

Before the last word finished, Burmir launched forward like a boulder loosed from a mountain. His spear slammed upward into the first bandit’s chest, lifting him off the ground with the force of the thrust. Blood sprayed as the man’s scream was cut short, and he crumpled like an empty sack.

The second bandit lunged at Mithri, slashing with a jagged blade. She ducked low, rolled to the side, and fired an arrow point-blank into his thigh. As he roared and stumbled, Hager was on him—his axe came down with a wet crunch into the man’s shoulder, driving deep. The bandit dropped, twitching, and Eloanil muttered a soft word, her hand glowing with faint silver light as she steadied her companions.

Silence again. Just panting and the smell of blood.

Hager leaned over and rifled through the corpses, pulling out a small pouch. “Ten silver. Hardly worth their lives.”

Burmir wiped his spear on the nearest corpse and stood, listening.

Hooves. Distant and fading. The galloping of many horses, retreating beyond the village.

“They’re pullin’ out,” he said. “Probably took what they came for.”

The four moved cautiously, cracking open the hatch and slipping out into the ruined night. The tavern was half-burned, smoke curling from its shattered windows. The village was in ruin—charred houses, bodies in the street, the air still hot with fire. They crept between shadows, using collapsed walls and fences for cover.

But near the blackened remains of the old smithy, they were spotted.

Three bandits stood near a looted cart, red-faced from drink, weapons already stained with the night's work.

"Oi! You lot! More of you rats?" one bellowed, reaching for his blade.

Burmir didn't wait for pleasantries.

He charged the first, his spear driving forward, smashing through the man's gut with a brutal crunch. The bandit dropped with a choking gurgle. Mithri fired two arrows in quick succession—one struck a bandit in the shoulder, the second square in the throat.

The last man, seeing the odds turn, ran at Eloanil with a raised mace—but she stood firm, eyes shining with divine light. Just before the blow landed, Hager appeared at the man's flank and drove his axe into the side of his skull with a roar. The bandit dropped like a felled tree.

For a long moment, the party stood in the smoke and silence, surrounded by death and ruin.

Burmir spit into the dirt and glanced around. "Not the quietest night I've had. But we're alive."

The others nodded, gathering what coin and gear they could from the dead.

The smoke hung low and sour across the remains of Dragonspear, curling through the blackened ribs of what had been homes, shops, and lives. The earth was dark with blood in places, streaked with ash in others. Horses had scattered into the hills, the cries of widows and the wounded echoed between the charred bones of the village, and the fires still whispered from collapsed rooftops. The air was heavy with ruin, and even the wind, which once carried the scent of pine and riverwater, seemed now afraid to speak.

Burmir stood near the ruined well in the village center, his spear gripped in one hand, the shaft still sticky with dried blood from the last of the bandits he'd skewered the night before. His armor was dented, smeared with soot, and his beard had singed ends curling from the fires he'd passed through. Around him, survivors moved like sleepwalkers—quiet, dazed, not yet daring to hope that the worst had passed.

They hadn't won. The bandits had left when they'd taken what they came for.

A rasping voice pulled him from thought.

"Warrior..."

He turned and saw the elder, old Garrek, half-covered in a torn blanket, one hand pressed over his stomach where red soaked through. The old dwarf had been the closest thing the

village had to a chieftain, and now he lay propped against the wall of the temple, his breath shallow and uneven.

Burmir dropped to one knee beside him. “Hold still, you mad stone. We’ve got a cleric or two still breathin’, I’ll—”

Garrek shook his head weakly. “Too late for me. Flame’s already licking at my heels.”

“You’re not goin’ out like this,” Burmir muttered.

“Listen,” the elder said, his voice suddenly sharp. He fumbled with a pouch at his side, pulled free a scrap of ancient parchment—a jagged, brittle fragment of a map, its ink faded and script dwarven. He pressed it into Burmir’s hand.

“They weren’t raiding for silver,” he whispered. “Not just hunger. They came for this. They serve something worse than greed… worse than steel.”

Burmir furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“The Order of the Ashen Flame… zealots… burn for a dragon,” Garrek hissed. “An old green beast, dying but not dead. They seek the Heart. The heart of stone…”

Burmir felt the weight of the fragment like it had its own pulse. “Duramad’s Heart?”

Garrek nodded weakly. “Aye. Hidden by the deep clans… long ago. It feeds the land, holds the lines. If they find it, they’ll twist it… poison the soil, the rivers. Make the old wyrm young again.”

The elder’s eyes clouded, and his head lolled back.

Burmir gripped his arm. “Garrek. Don’t—”

“Find it before they do,” the elder whispered, voice cracking like dry stone. “Or this land dies screaming.”

And with that, the last breath slipped from him.

Burmir stood slowly, the scrap of the map held in his hand like a wound. Around him, Dragonspear lay in the hush of aftermath, a place teetering between hope and ruin.

He stared out across the village, to the scorched tree line and the ruined homes. He saw Hager limping out from behind the blackened forge, Eloanil tending to a child whose mother would not wake, and Mithri—still silent, still watching the hills.

Burmir looked to the map, then to the mountains in the distance.

“Looks like we’ve got work to do,” he muttered, stuffing the map into his pack.

And just like that, the road ahead opened—wide, uncertain, and bound with fire.

Burmir sat on a low stone outside the temple ruins, elbows on his knees, the worn scrap of map open in his calloused hands. Smoke drifted from the surrounding rubble in lazy spirals. The smell of blood and burning wood clung to everything. He stared at the brittle parchment as though it might speak to him, but its marks remained stubbornly silent—half a location, etched runes in old dwarven, and the faint outline of what might have once been a mine or fortress.

Footsteps approached. Heavy ones.

Hager limped into view, his face smeared with soot, his axe slung over his shoulder. He sat down with a grunt and offered a jug of watered ale. Burmir took it, drank deep.

“They burned my forge,” Hager said after a moment. “Split my anvil in half. Must’ve taken the iron, the horseshoes, even the slag. Bastards knew what they were lookin’ for.”

Burmir nodded, handing the jug back. “Not just any raid. The elder… he told me things. About an old relic. Something dwarves buried long ago. Something dangerous.”

Hager grunted. “A relic? Gods, always some cursed relic.”

A shadow crossed the square. Mithri approached, her bow still in hand, the string taut and stained. Her sharp eyes flicked between them, and without a word, she crouched beside the stone, glancing down at the fragment.

“I saw their tracks,” she said. “They didn’t scatter like raiders. They moved with purpose. Pattern. Like a military unit.”

“And their symbol,” Eloanil added, stepping up from the other side, her robes fluttering in the ash-stirred breeze. “I found it marked on a child’s door. A flame, twisted like a snake. That’s not banditry. That’s a creed.”

Burmir looked up at her. “The elder called them the Order of the Ashen Flame. Fanatics. Said they serve a dragon.”

Eloanil paled. “A dragon?”

Mithri scoffed. “I thought dragons stayed in stories.”

Burmir shook his head. “This one breathes still. Barely. But he’s got his claws in the land, and his servants are looking for somethin’ called Duramad’s Heart. Some stone relic the dwarves buried to keep the land balanced. And if they get it…”

“They twist it,” Hager finished. “Corrupt it.”

Burmir folded the map and stood. “We can sit in the ashes and curse the gods, or we can track these bastards and stop whatever’s comin’.”

Mithri rose, brushing dust from her leggings. “Where does the map point?”

“North,” Burmir said. “Serpent Hill.”

Eloanil looked toward the charred horizon. “Then that’s where we go.”

The four of them stood in the ruin of a village, ash in their lungs, fire still burning in their blood. The air had shifted. They were no longer survivors—they were seekers now. Hunters.

They found the bandit bound and bruised behind the old grain mill, half-conscious beneath a fallen beam. A pair of villagers had dragged him out of the wreckage, sword still strapped to his side. He was younger than Burmir expected—maybe twenty winters, with blood in his teeth and more fear than fire in his eyes.

Burmir stood over him, arms crossed, the haft of his spear resting across one shoulder. Hager knelt nearby, sharpening his axe with the slow, deliberate rhythm of a man with time and no mercy.

The bandit spat. “Kill me, then. Ain’t afraid of no dwarf steel.”

Burmir leaned down, his voice low. “That so? Then you won’t mind a slow one. My friend Hager’s good at makin’ the blood come out quiet.”

Hager smiled, still sharpening. “Aye. Like slicin’ the rind off a cheese wheel.”

The bandit’s bravado faltered, eyes flicking between them.

Mithri stood behind, silent and unmoving, her arrow already nocked. Eloanil stepped forward then, not with a threat, but with a cool calmness that made the moment feel colder.

“You’re already bleeding,” she said softly. “Your friends are dead or fled. You can tell us why they came and walk out of here. Or you can rot with your jaw split open.”

The bandit swallowed hard.

“They paid us,” he muttered. “Didn’t say much. Just gold and orders. A priest—he wore black and red robes, like a dying fire. Had this brand on his hand… like a twisted flame.”

Burmir crouched, now at eye level. “The Order of the Ashen Flame?”

The bandit blinked, surprised. “Y—yeah. That’s what they called themselves. Priests. Said they served something powerful. Something ancient. We just wanted coin.”

“What did they want with this village?” Eloanil asked. “What were they looking for?”

The bandit looked down, ashamed. “They weren’t after food or steel. They were diggin’… askin’ about an old dwarf… a relic buried somewhere nearby. Called it ‘the heart of stone.’ Said if we found it, we’d be blessed.”

Burmir’s eyes narrowed. “They ever mention a name? A leader?”

The bandit nodded slowly. “They spoke of someone… something… Myruulthar. A dragon. Said he’s asleep but not for long. That when he wakes, we’d be part of the new fire.”

Hager spat. “New fire my hairy arse. Sounds like the ramblings of a half-rotted cult.”

Mithri drew back her bow slightly. “So they plan to burn more villages, I suppose?”

The bandit raised both hands. “I don’t know! I swear it! I was just promised gold. We weren’t supposed to stay long. Hit, search, move on.”

Burmir stood, looming tall. “Then I’d start runnin’. If you’re lucky, you’ll outpace what’s comin’ for traitors and mad priests alike.”

The bandit scrambled to his feet, hesitated, and then turned and fled into the smoke beyond the fields, limping hard.

Silence hung over the group.

“They’re organized,” Mithri said finally. “Not rabble. This is war. They’re hunting relics.”

“And the dragon’s name has weight,” Eloanil added. “Even the woods whisper it. Myruulthar... I’ve heard it before. An ancient corruption.”

Burmir looked toward the north. “Then it’s not just treasure they’re after. It’s power. And if they find the Heart…”

He didn’t finish the sentence.

He didn’t need to.

Serpent Hill

The road to Serpent Hill was no longer just a path.

It was the first step into the fire.

The path leading northward from Dragonspear wound like an old scar across the land, cutting through long stretches of windblown grass, crooked stones, and lonesome trees that stood like sentinels over the past. The air smelled of damp earth and ash carried faintly still from the village behind them. The sun climbed steadily as the party pressed on, their gear clinking with each step and the silence between them filled only with the occasional caw of a distant bird or the creak of worn leather.

By mid-afternoon, they reached a quiet clearing where a small pond rested in the shadow of an ancient boulder, its surface glassy and still. Long reeds framed the banks, and dragonflies darted like sparks above the water.

“Good spot,” Burmir grunted, lowering his pack. He pulled out his pipe, struck flint to tinder, and puffed until the familiar curls of smoke wound up past his eyebrows.

Hager, with a relieved sigh, dropped his axe beside a patch of soft moss and began gathering sticks and dried grass for a fire. “Aye. Just hope there ain’t any snakes.”

Mithri and Eloanil set off together with fishing lines and knives, and within a short while, they returned with two fat fish—silver and speckled. The fire popped to life as the fish cooked, and soon the scent of crisping skin and herbs filled the clearing. The meal was simple but satisfying, chased down with gulps from their waterskins and a quiet contentment.

After eating, and with no sign of danger nearby, they decided to take a dip. The water was cool and startling against the warmth of the sun, but welcome. Burmir, thick and bristled as ever, floated like a barrel and occasionally puffed his pipe just above the surface, barely bothering to swim. Hager splashed with less grace but no less joy. Eloanil drifted quietly, her hair fanned around her, and Mithri stood near the shallows, watching the reeds.

Then, without warning, a blur of feathers and furious quacking descended upon her.

“What in the hells—!” Mithri shouted as a duck, fierce and territorial, latched onto a lock of her hair and tugged.

The others burst out laughing as she flailed, the duck smacking at her with wings in defense of its nearby nest. Eloanil waded over and gently shooed it away, while Hager gasped, red in the face, from laughter.

“I swear,” Mithri said, pulling feathers from her hair, “that bird fights better than half the bandits I’ve faced.”

“Probably had better cause,” Burmir muttered, pipe bobbing in his mouth.

As the sun dipped low and the light turned gold, they sat by the fire, gear laid out and drying, cleaning their armor and weapons. The mood quieted.

“That bandit mentioned a dwarven ruin,” Eloanil said, turning a whetstone across her dagger’s edge. “Records of the old mines.”

Burmir nodded. “Would make sense. The deep clans always kept their histories in stone and iron. If this relic’s tied to them, we’ll find our first real lead there.”

“Then Serpent Hill it is,” Hager said. “Might be buried, but we’ll find the bones.”

With gear cleaned and bodies rested, they laid down by the fire, the stars just beginning to blink through the darkening sky.

The next morning, they rose early and continued into the High Moor.

The landscape changed as they walked—broad, open, and endless. The High Moor stretched wide like an ocean of wind. Low hills rose and fell with slow grace, carpeted in thick grass and patches of heath. Fog clung to the distant ridgelines, and strange calls echoed from unseen creatures. The air tasted of rain, though the skies remained dry, and here and there they saw ancient standing stones half-buried in moss, their markings long faded.

It was a lonely land, silent but not still, and the kind of place where the bones of forgotten wars might yet rest just beneath the soil.

And somewhere beyond those windswept hills, Serpent Hill waited.

The wind picked up as they crossed the crest of a low hill, the moor spreading endlessly ahead—rolling grass, scattered stones, and skies that seemed too wide for the earth they covered. The sun glinted through pale clouds, throwing long shadows across the land. Burmir

led the group along a narrow trail that dipped between two stony ridges when he raised his hand suddenly, halting the party.

Voices.

Rough. Guttural.

As they came closer, hidden behind a large boulder and some wind-warped brush, four orcs lounged in a hollow, sitting around the charred remains of a long-dead campfire. Their armor was ragged, scuffed from years of war, and their crude blades lay close to hand. One of them gnawed at a bone, while another picked his teeth with an arrowhead.

The biggest of the four stood up as the party approached, squinting with yellow eyes.

“Well now,” he said with a grin that revealed cracked tusks. “Look what wandered in. A grumpy dwarf, another dwarf, two shiny tree-sniffers.”

The second orc rose and pointed a chipped spear toward them. “You got wine? I smell wine.”

“We ain’t here to trade,” Burmir said, lowering his spear but keeping it ready.

The third orc, thinner than the rest but wearing a necklace of teeth, snorted. “Ain’t askin’ for trade. We’re askin’ for a gift. A pour for us thirsty soldiers.”

“And if we say no?” Hager asked, stepping forward, axe already in hand.

The first orc laughed. “Then we’ll just cut the kegs from your bellies.”

Burmir let out a grunt that might’ve been a chuckle.

“Well then,” he said, raising his spear, “come try, you dog-blooded halfwits.”

The fight erupted like a storm.

The lead orc lunged at Burmir, greatsword swinging in a brutal overhead arc. Burmir met him with a low stance, the spear driving into the orc’s thigh just before the blade smashed down against his shoulder, cutting a deep gash through his armor.

Hager roared and met the second orc axe to axe, the clang of their weapons ringing across the moor. He caught a slash across his ribs but responded with a cleaving blow that cracked bone.

Mithri danced between the third and fourth orcs, her bow firing quick, precise arrows into exposed joints. One arrow lodged in a throat, but not before a jagged axe caught her side, tearing through her cloak and into the flesh below.

Eloanil moved behind them, murmuring sacred words, her hands glowing with divine light. She shielded Hager from a killing blow and sent a searing bolt of energy into an orc’s chest, burning straight through the beast’s heart.

The final orc, bloodied and wild-eyed, charged at her—but Burmir stepped in, spear haft cracking against its jaw before the tip found its mark under the chin, driving upward with a wet crunch.

The air was thick with blood and sweat, the grass stained red. Burmir's breathing was ragged, his leg cut and his shoulder still bleeding.

The orcs lay dead, twitching among their own spilled guts.

The party tended their wounds quickly—Eloanil weaving what healing she could, though her magic was not endless. They pressed onward, bruised but breathing.

As they marched, the moor grew quieter again, the sounds of the fight fading into the wide silence. The wind whispered through the long grass, carrying with it the distant cry of a lone hawk circling high above. Insects buzzed faintly, hidden beneath the brush, and from far off, a stream burbled through a cracked stone channel. The sky was a vast, pale dome above them, and the land rolled like green and brown waves into every direction.

They walked in silence for a time, the crunch of boots on soil, the low clink of armor, and the occasional grunt of pain the only sounds.

The world was watching, it seemed. And Serpent Hill waited still.

The footpath curved gently downward through the hills, narrowing between two rising slopes where dark trees began to emerge from the moorland like jagged shadows. Their trunks were twisted, bark blackened with age, and their limbs swayed with the wind though no breeze stirred the grass. The light dimmed under their canopy, the sky choked by branches tangled like old spiderwebs. Burmir grunted uneasily.

"These trees look like they've seen too much," he muttered.

"No birds," Mithri observed, her eyes scanning the high boughs. "No animals. Just… silence."

They continued down the path, their boots crunching over roots and fallen leaves.

Then, from around a bend in the path, a figure approached.

She moved like drifting smoke—tall, graceful, robed in green and brown stitched fabrics. Her skin was pale as moonlight, and across her high cheekbones and forehead were intricate black tattoos that glinted faintly as she stepped through a shaft of filtered sunlight. Long hair like raven feathers spilled over her shoulders, and her eyes—silver, unblinking—watched them as she passed.

The party slowed.

She turned her head, speaking in a soft, echoing voice.

"Where do the children of iron and bone walk with such grim fire in their eyes?"

Burmir blinked. “We’re headed for Serpent Hill. Dwarven ruins.”

She stepped closer, lips curling slightly, though it was not quite a smile.

“Ah… the hill where bones drink wind and stone remembers screams. You seek old things. Forgotten things.”

Hager frowned. “You know it?”

“I have walked its edges. I have listened to the stones murmur in the moonlight,” she said, voice low and rhythmic. “Many have entered. Few return whole… if at all.”

Eloanil stepped forward. “We seek knowledge of a relic. Something buried. We don’t seek to defile.”

The elf woman tilted her head, studying them one by one.

“The stones do not care why you enter,” she said. “They only know the weight of blood and the songs of the lost.”

Then, in a language old and lyrical, she began to recite:

"Below the serpent’s crooked rise,
Where sunless echoes stir and cry,
Speak not your name to hollow air,
Lest something old should find you there."

Mithri tensed slightly, her hand brushing the edge of her blade. “What was that?”

“A warning,” the woman said simply. “And a farewell.”

Without another word, she turned and walked down the path behind them, her form fading quickly between the twisted trunks as though the forest had swallowed her.

The party stood still a moment, watching the place she’d vanished.

“Well,” Burmir muttered, “that was comforting.”

They continued on, the forest giving way again to open ground. The Serpent Hills began to rise ahead of them now, distant, like the backs of sleeping beasts. The light returned, golden and soft, casting their shadows long across the grass.

By dusk, they chose a flat outcrop overlooking a dip in the land to make their camp. Hager cleared brush while Burmir gathered wood. Eloanil murmured a soft prayer before striking the fire, and Mithri set a perimeter with sharpened sticks in the earth, ever the scout.

As the flames caught and the smoke rose into the evening air, they sat in silence, staring into the firelight, each one thinking of the elven woman and her moon-pale eyes, and the way her words clung to the bones of the earth.

The fire crackled gently as dusk faded into night. Stars began to blink into being overhead, and the moorland wind had settled, leaving the hills quiet and still around them. The flames cast long shadows against the rocks and flickered in the eyes of the party as they sat close together, worn from travel but warm with food and shared presence.

Burmir took a long pull from his pipe, exhaled a cloud of smoke, then glanced across the fire toward the two elves.

“You’ve fought like soldiers and spoken like sages,” he said, his tone easy but edged with curiosity. “We’ve bled beside each other, but I know nothing of how you two came to Dragonspear. Or each other, for that matter. Seems the time for stories, if any.”

Hager grunted in agreement, pouring himself a bit of watered wine. “Aye. The fire’s warm, and the road ahead cold. Let’s hear it.”

Eloanil smiled faintly, her eyes reflecting the firelight. She drew her cloak tighter and spoke softly.

“I was born in Sildeyuir, the half-world between this one and the realm of the fey,” she began. “My mother was a seer of Sehanine, my father a hunter of shadows. It was a place of beauty, but not without danger. Spirits walk freely there. Time doesn’t pass the same.”

Burmir raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like you barely escaped dreamin’ yourself into a tree.”

Eloanil gave a small laugh. “Sometimes I wonder if I ever left. But no, I chose to leave. I saw something in a vision—a dragon, old and rotting, sleeping beneath roots and stone. I tried to dismiss it, but the visions grew stronger. I left Sildeyuir to find meaning, wandered west

through forests and over rivers, helping where I could. I became a healer. I found my way to Dragonspear six months ago, drawn to something I couldn't explain. Perhaps fate, perhaps the will of the gods."

She glanced at the fire. "And there… I stayed."

Mithri leaned forward, resting her chin on one hand.

"My tale's less mystic," she said. "I was born in the forests near Evereska, daughter of a woodsman and a fletcher. My people didn't talk much of magic or prophecy. We lived by bow and silence, hunting, listening, surviving. I learned to track before I could read. I remember the song of owls and the smell of pine sap in the morning better than I remember faces."

She hesitated, her tone darkening.

"One day, a group of humans came through. Loggers. They weren't supposed to be there. My brother tried to talk to them, to guide them back out. They laughed and left him with an arrow in his gut. He died before the trees could mourn."

Burmir's brows lowered, and Hager muttered, "Bastards."

"I left after that," Mithri continued. "Couldn't stay in the trees anymore. I wandered. Took up coin-work in towns, guarded caravans, hunted beasts. I met Eloanil in a village north of Daggerford—she healed me after a poisoned arrow near took my arm. I've followed her since. She has peace. I borrow it sometimes."

Eloanil smiled quietly at that. "We traveled together after that. Our path led to Dragonspear just weeks before the raid."

There was a silence, but it was a comfortable one.

Burmir nodded slowly, then raised his mug. "To paths crossed. And the bastards we'll put in the ground together."

They drank.

And the fire burned steady, throwing sparks into the windless dark, as four souls sat beneath the stars, their pasts now laid beside the flames.

The flames crackled low as the night deepened, the stars bright now above the moorland sky. Silence had settled once again, save for the occasional whistle of wind brushing through the grasses beyond the camp. The embers painted the party in hues of orange and gold, shadows dancing on their weathered faces.

After a pause, Eloanil turned to Burmir and Hager, her tone light but curious. "And what of you two? You've heard our stories. We've fought together, nearly died together. It's only fair you share your roots as well."

Mithri gave a sideways grin. “Especially you, Burmir. I can’t picture you as anything but a grumbling, armor-clad stone with a pipe.”

Burmir let out a short laugh, puffing his pipe as he leaned back against a pack. “Aye, well… not much to picture, but I’ll give it a go.”

He tapped the pipe against a rock, then looked out into the darkness as he spoke.

“I was born in Llorkh, back when the streets still smelled of wet stone and not horse piss. My parents didn’t last long—fever took 'em both before I was fifty. Was raised by my grandmother, a stubborn old crow who smoked pipeweed strong enough to peel paint. She left me her burrow when she passed, gods bless her wrinkled soul. I still find her boot prints in the floor some mornings.”

He chuckled softly.

“Didn’t take to mining like the rest of 'em. My kin, they wanted me swingin’ a pick at the walls till I dropped. I wanted more than dust and silver shavings. So I started wanderin’—not far at first, just outside the village, pokin’ into caves, followin’ old roads. One time I picked a fight with a cave bear. Lost half an ear and gained a good story.”

Mithri raised an eyebrow. “You won?”

“Eventually,” Burmir said, rubbing the scarred edge of his ear. “Still limps worse than me.”

“I got a knack for findin’ things,” he added. “Old things. Chipped blades, coins from kingdoms long gone. Once found a goblin king’s bones in a swamp, crown and all. That’s what keeps me movin’. The world’s filled with pieces of the past waitin’ to be dug up—and I’m the fool who keeps diggin’.”

Eloanil smiled, her eyes thoughtful. “And you, Hager?”

The other dwarf looked up from where he sat oiling his axe, then leaned forward, elbows on knees.

“Dragonspear’s my home,” he said. “Was born in the west end of the village, back when the forge fires never went out. My father was a blacksmith—hard hands, harder words. He used to say a good axe don’t cry when it strikes, and neither should the one who swings it.”

Burmir gave a short nod. “Sounds like a proper dwarf.”

Hager chuckled. “Aye, he was. Taught me the craft by the time I could lift a hammer. I wasn’t much for books or prayer, but give me metal and a fire, and I was happy.”

His voice softened for a moment.

“I had a younger brother, Halvik. Bright eyes, fast hands. Wanted to be a warrior. Got himself conscripted to a merchant’s guard line and never came back. Bandit arrow, they said.”

He looked at the flames. “That’s when I picked up the axe. Figured if the world was gonna take my kin, I’d give it reason to fear the name they carried.”

The fire popped, and the silence that followed was a solemn one.

“But I stayed,” Hager continued. “Kept the forge running, mended blades, hammered out horseshoes. Then the raid came. They burned it. Took everything I’d built. That’s when I found you lot.”

He looked around the fire, nodding once. “And I figure I’ll build somethin’ else. With this.”

He tapped the handle of his axe and sat back.

Burmir raised his mug. “To forges lost, and battles found.”

The others echoed the toast, their voices low but strong.

And around them, the night held its peace. The wind whispered through the grasses like a lullaby from the hills themselves, and the fire burned steady beneath the watching stars.

Dawn crept slow and golden over the moor, casting long fingers of light across the low hills and painting the grass with dew-bright silver. The fire had burned to embers, and the chill of early morning clung to cloaks and breath. One by one, the party stirred—stretching sore limbs, rolling shoulders, and blinking away the fatigue of dreams laced with whispers and ancient ruins.

Burmir was the first up, already chewing on a strip of dried meat and rolling his pipe between his teeth. “Time to see if the dead remember what the living forgot,” he muttered.

They packed quickly and in silence, the memory of the elven witch’s warning still fresh in their minds. The camp left no trace behind, just the pressed grass and ash. By midmorning, they crested a low ridge, and Serpent Hill loomed before them.

It rose from the land like a broken fang, its surface scarred by time, its flanks scattered with crumbled stone and blackened brush. Half-buried in the hillside was a great stone arch, half-

collapsed, carved with worn dwarven runes now choked with ivy. The air was still, heavy. The entrance yawned like a mouth waiting to speak old curses.

They approached with weapons ready.

Inside, the stone was damp and the air sharp with the scent of old dust and iron. Their boots echoed through the ancient corridors, the sound swallowed quickly by the oppressive silence of the deep. Broken columns and fallen beams littered the halls, and the once-proud dwarven craftsmanship lay cracked and faded.

After several turns through the ruins, the silence broke.

A clacking—faint at first, then rising like brittle rain on stone.

From the darkness, four skeletons emerged, their bones yellowed and scarred by centuries of decay. Each wore fragments of rusted armor, and in their hands, they gripped short swords, pitted but still deadly. Hollow eye sockets burned with pale, unnatural light.

“Of course,” Burmir grunted, drawing his spear. “They never rest easy.”

The fight exploded in the narrow hall.

One skeleton rushed Hager with a shriek, its blade slicing across his shoulder, but he caught it with his axe in a counterblow that shattered the skull in a spray of bone dust.

Burmir met two head-on, blocking the first sword strike and jabbing forward, his spear punching through ribcage and spine. The skeleton collapsed, but the second slashed across his arm, drawing a line of blood through his sleeve.

Mithri loosed an arrow into the fray, striking a skeleton in the spine—it stumbled, turned, and lunged at her. She rolled beneath the blow and slammed her dagger into its leg joint, toppling it.

Eloanil chanted low, her hand glowing with divine light, and raised it just as a skeleton tried to flank Burmir. A beam of radiance blasted from her palm, slamming into the undead with a flash of white fire. The bones exploded in a burst of sacred flame.

Silence returned, broken only by panting breaths and the slow trickle of blood from shallow wounds.

They stood among the shattered remains, the skeletons nothing more now than dust and rust.

“Still no fan of the dead walking,” Hager muttered, pressing a cloth to his shoulder.

“They were protecting something,” Eloanil said, glancing ahead down the corridor.

They pressed deeper into the ruins and soon came to what remained of an ancient archive. Broken shelves and rotting scrolls lined the walls, but one heavy chest—miraculously sealed from rot—remained intact. Mithri picked the lock, and inside they found stone tablets and metal-bound ledgers inscribed in old dwarvish.

Burmir’s eyes lit up as he ran his fingers across one of the plates. “This is it. Records of the old mine roads, vault markings… and here—Duramad’s Hall. Still marked. Still deep.”

They rolled the records into cloth, tucked them into packs

As the party gathered their findings from the stone chest, the still air of the ruin was suddenly broken by the sound of soft footsteps—far too soft for armored boots. A sharp whistle cut through the corridor, followed by a chorus of mischievous laughter that echoed unnaturally through the chamber.

From a narrow side passage, five halflings emerged in quick succession, all wearing mismatched leathers, scarves, and the kind of smugness only professional thieves could wear comfortably. One had a feathered cap too big for his head; another wore a belt lined with empty potion flasks and lockpicks. They stood in a loose semi-circle near the chamber’s edge, arms crossed or twirling daggers in their fingers.

“Well, well, look at this,” said the one with the feathered cap, his grin wide and wicked. “A band of tallfolk digging through *our* trove. You’re either brave or brainless.”

“There’s no treasure here,” Eloanil said calmly, standing from the chest. “We were searching for old dwarven records, not gold.”

“Oh, *records*, is it?” said another halfling with a crooked nose and a sharp accent. “Funny, the dead you left behind weren’t clutching ledgers.”

Burmir grumbled. “I swear if you pests don’t—”

Too late.

One of the halflings darted forward with the speed of a weasel and slipped a hand into Burmir’s belt pouch before the dwarf could swat him away. “Thank you kindly!” he chirped, flipping back and running to the far side of the room with Burmir’s silver jangling in his hands.

At the same time, another halfling performed a neat tumble in front of Hager, snatched his axe from where it rested at his feet, and rolled away, laughing maniacally. “Bit heavy for a rat like me, but I’ll manage!”

A third leapt past Mithri, snatching a healing potion from her belt mid-stride and landing in a crouch with a sly bow. “M’lady, I thank you for your contribution to the Halfling Underground Recovery Fund.”

Then came the spitting—quick, accurate pocks of saliva onto boots and armor—followed by mocking laughter as the halflings scattered, darting between pillars and fallen stones, impossible to pin down.

That was the final straw.

Burmir let out a roar that rattled the very stones. “Thievin’ rats! I’ll break your legs and roast them for stew!”

The chamber exploded into chaos.

Burmir charged after the silver-snatcher, who ducked and weaved through rubble. The dwarf hurled his spear like a harpoon, narrowly missing, but forcing the halfling to leap backward—and into a wall. Burmir followed with fists like boulders, landing a gut-punch that sent the halfling sprawling.

Hager, now red-faced and weaponless, wrestled his axe back from the grinning thief with a fierce shoulder-tackle. The two rolled, fists flying, until Hager came up holding the axe and the halfling dangling by the collar, yelling curses until he was knocked unconscious with the flat of the blade.

Mithri fired two arrows in rapid succession—both meant to miss, both meant to herd. The potion thief zigzagged, laughing, until he turned into Eloanil, who delivered a well-placed elbow to his face that sent him tumbling into a heap of old bones.

The final two halflings attempted to escape, but one was tripped by a flash of divine light from Eloanil's palm, and the other ran straight into Mithri's knee, earning a swift boot to the ribs.

Within moments, all five halflings were groaning on the floor, bound and bruised, surrounded by the fuming party.

Burmir retrieved his silver and looked down at the one with the feathered cap. "Next time you try pickin' a dwarf's pocket, bring a healer and a will."

The halfling wheezed. "Worth it…"

"Do we kill them?" Hager asked.

Eloanil shook her head. "They're not worth it."

Mithri smirked. "Let them limp home with their bruises and learn fear."

Burmir grunted. "Or they'll just come back with friends."

But he didn't argue further. The party gathered their things again—silver, axe, potion, and pride—and moved on.

They left the ruin behind as the echoes of halfling curses faded behind them, the halls of Serpent Hill quiet once more.

Their next destination: the old mine roads. And whatever shadows lay beneath.

The wind had picked up as they moved deeper into the hills. Serpent Hill loomed before them now, not just a name on a map but a towering, broken spine of stone that rose sharply from the land, its ridges curling like the body of some ancient beast sleeping under grass and time. The path narrowed as they neared, winding through boulders half-swallowed by earth and roots, and the air carried the scent of minerals, dry moss, and something deeper—the smell of old stone.

“Feels like I’ve walked into a dream I used to hear around the hearth,” Burmir muttered as they crested a rise. “My great-uncle used to speak of the mines beneath this place. Said the stones whispered here. Said if you listened long enough, you’d hear the mountain breathe.”

“Comforting,” Mithri said dryly, scanning the ridgelines. “Let’s hope it doesn’t decide to breathe fire.”

They followed the slope down toward the southern face of the hill where a jagged crack split the stone like a scar. Old rail tracks, mostly rusted and swallowed by grass, led toward a partially collapsed entryway half-hidden beneath an overhang of slate and bramble. The entrance was choked with debris, but the faint outline of ancient dwarven carvings could still be seen—weatherworn hammers, pickaxes, and the crest of a forgotten clan.

Burmir moved slowly, reverently, tracing the symbol with his thick fingers. “Clan Dolgrin. My blood on my mother’s side. This was ours.”

Eloanil looked around the clearing. “Then we’re standing in history.”

They cleared the entrance carefully, dragging aside loose stone and broken wood. Once enough space had been made, the party lit torches and descended into the mine.

The air turned cold and dry. The tunnels, while mostly intact, bore the scars of abandonment—collapsed shafts, rusted lanterns, and tools left to rot. Veins of quartz and dull iron glittered faintly beneath layers of dust.

Deeper inside, they came upon wide mining chambers, some still bearing old scaffolding and ore carts long emptied. A stone plaque, cracked but legible, was set into the wall:

“Here labored the Dolgrin, beneath the breath of the serpent, and by their hands were riches carved.”

Burmir paused, running his thumb across the inscription. “They didn’t just mine for gold. These tunnels held secrets—vaults and archives.”

They pressed further, finding signs of ancient habitation—storage rooms lined with stone bins, an abandoned forge cold with time, and what appeared to be an office carved into the wall itself. Inside were fragments of ledgers, rusted tools, and an iron-bound chest that refused to open without force. Hager swung his axe with a grunt, breaking the lock.

Inside lay brittle scrolls sealed in waxed cases, and a set of flat metal tablets carved with dwarvish glyphs. Eloanil carefully brushed one clean and read aloud, slowly deciphering the runes.

“Duramad’s Vault… sealed beneath the spine of the world… keyed to oathstone and bloodline…”

Burmir’s brow furrowed. “Ancestral lock. Only a descendant could open it.”

“Which means you,” Mithri said.

“Aye,” Burmir said, with something like pride curling in his voice. “And that means we’re closer than we thought.”

The mine creaked faintly, disturbed by presence and time, and a small trickle of pebbles fell from the ceiling. A warning, perhaps.

“Let’s not linger,” Hager said. “These tunnels feel like they remember how to bury the living.”

They gathered the scrolls and tablets, packed them carefully, and made their way back to another tunnel. The wind had changed when they emerged, colder now.

Burmir looked back once more. “They left this place for a reason. The deeper we go, the more bones we’ll be waking.”

Eloanil touched his shoulder. “Then we tread carefully. But we tread forward.”

The Heart was not just a legend.

It was real.

And it waited, buried in the dark.

The further they went, the more the mine began to feel unlike a mine at all.

What began as rough-hewn corridors and timber-supported shafts slowly gave way to older, more refined stonework—pillars etched with curling patterns, floors that bore signs of polish beneath centuries of dust, and carvings that hinted at symbolism far older than the Dolgrin clan. The air felt charged now, heavy and expectant.

Mithri was the first to spot the odd marking—a serpent coiled around a hammer, carved in low relief on the wall of a branching corridor.

“Serpent Hill, indeed,” she murmured.

Burmir’s brows lowered. “That’s no clan symbol. That’s older. Maybe even pre-Dolgrin.”

They moved down the side corridor, narrower and more enclosed, lit only by the flicker of their torches. Then came the grinding sound.

Stone shifting.

From alcoves in the walls, half-concealed by crumbled masonry, figures began to emerge—humanoid but twisted, their lower bodies sculpted into long serpentine coils, arms ending in clawed stone hands, their faces worn smooth except for the hollow sockets where eyes once had been.

“Guardians,” Eloanil breathed. “Bound to protect something.”

Their stone forms moved with sudden speed.

The first guardian struck, its clawed arm lashing out at Hager, who caught it with the flat of his axe. Sparks flew as steel met enchanted stone. Burmir stepped in, jabbing his spear into a joint where shoulder met torso—stone cracked, but the creature barely slowed.

Two more slithered forward, hissing—not with breath, but with a grinding rumble, like earth shifting.

Mithri loosed an arrow into one's torso, chipping a shoulder, then drew her short sword as another lunged. She ducked under its swipe and slashed across its coiled lower body, shards of rock splintering off like brittle ice.

Eloanil raised her hand, murmuring a prayer to Sehanine, and cast a radiant burst of moonlight down the narrow hall. One guardian staggered as its form glowed white-hot, cracks spreading across its body like veins of light.

The guardians retaliated with brute force—one slammed its tail against Burmir's legs, sending him crashing to the floor with a grunt. Another lashed its claws across Hager's arm, slicing through armor and drawing blood.

"Enough!" Hager roared, twisting in place and bringing his axe in a brutal arc. It connected with the creature's head, cleaving it clean in two. The statue fell, crumbling into a pile of broken stone.

Burmir, still on the ground, drove his spear upward as another loomed over him—straight through the guardian's chest, where a faintly glowing stone heart pulsed. The light flickered and died, and the construct collapsed beside him.

The final guardian, glowing faintly with residual divine light, was struck down by Eloanil’s second burst of energy and a well-placed arrow from Mithri.

Silence returned, save for the sound of their breathing.

Burmir stood, brushing dust from his beard. “I hate things that don’t bleed.”

“They were protecting something,” Eloanil said, turning to look at the far end of the corridor.

The tunnel pressed deeper into the mountain’s side, the air growing thick with stale damp and the metallic tang of age-old rust. Their footsteps echoed now, slow and cautious, boots thudding against stone carved by hands long returned to the earth. The flickering torchlight barely held the shadows at bay, and their breaths had begun to mist in the colder air.

They turned a bend, entering a chamber where the roof had partially collapsed. Broken mining tools lay scattered across the floor, and ancient supports groaned softly with the weight of stone. Burmir moved cautiously, running a hand along the wall, fingers brushing over old pickaxe marks. He stopped suddenly.

"There's a stillness here," he muttered.

Then, a sound—faint, like the chipping of stone.

They turned.

From the far end of the chamber, a pale shape flickered into view—translucent, ragged-bearded, his shoulders stooped as he mimed the motions of mining with a pick no longer there. A spectral dwarf, his body clothed in the wisps of another age. He did not seem to see them, not at first.

Eloanil stepped forward gently, raising a hand. "Spirits of the past... if you see us, speak."

The ghost froze mid-swing, and slowly turned his head.

Eyes like dim coals met theirs.

"Who... walks the blood-veined halls..." the ghost rasped. His voice echoed strangely, like wind through a tunnel. "Dolgrin kin? Steel-bearers?"

Burmir stepped forward, careful not to spook the spirit. "I am Burmir, of the Llorkh line—Dolgrin through my mother. We came seeking records of the mines… and the truth buried with them."

The ghost’s gaze sharpened. "Then you carry the weight. The old brotherhood sealed it... deep, where flame could not touch, where light fears to linger."

Burmir frowned. "Sealed what?"

But the spirit only shook his head. “We worked for gold… but bled for something greater. A heart that was not of flesh. We called it Duramad’s Promise. The brotherhood took it when the clans turned against each other. Hid it. Made it vanish.”

“And where?” Hager asked. “Where’s it hidden now?”

The ghost’s form wavered, as if the memory strained him. “Follow the veins. Past the hollow echoes. Look where the stone sings in silence…”

Then the figure dimmed, flickered once more, and vanished into the wall, leaving only the cold behind.

The silence was heavy until Mithri slumped against a wall and muttered, “What are we supposed to make of this...a ghost.”

Eloanil sighed, her voice tight with fatigue. “I’m too tired to chase phantoms through riddles. ‘Where the stone sings in silence’? That could mean anything.”

Burmir scratched his beard, brow furrowed. “Could mean the lower shafts. Might be the old echo tunnels—used for testing cavern strength. Some were cut too deep and abandoned.”

Hager shook his head. “Could also mean nothing. Spirits love riddles.”

Mithri opened her waterskin, took a small sip. “If we’re going deeper, we’ll need to eat and rest. I’ve got enough in me for one more fight, and that’s pushing it.”

Burmir looked back at the empty space where the ghost had vanished. “Whatever they buried, they buried it for a reason.”

“We keep moving,” Eloanil said softly. “But cautiously.”

Further into the tunnels, the path opened into a vaulted chamber half-collapsed with time. Thick dust hung in the air, disturbed only by their careful steps. Against the back wall, half-buried in debris and mineral deposits, stood a heavy stone tablet resting on an iron stand, etched with dwarven runes and thin carvings of tree branches woven with stars.

Burmir moved to it first, brushing off layers of dust and old spiderwebs with his gloved hand. “This ain’t just dwarven,” he muttered. “This has elven etchings mixed in. Some kind of alliance marker maybe.”

Eloanil stepped beside him, eyes scanning the runes. “That’s old high script... here. ‘In green shadows truth is kept, where stone and leaf meet sky. Seek the one who does not forget beneath the stars of Daggerford.’”

Hager let out a low grunt. “Daggerford Forest. Sounds like a damn elf archive.”

“May be,” Burmir said, standing back. “An archivist who remembers the pact. Maybe more clues to this ‘Duramad’s Promise.’”

They sat then, backs to the wall, their bodies stiff and weary. Mithri passed around dried meat and a hunk of hard cheese. No one said much for the first few bites—just the sound of chewing and drinking from waterskins.

“I’ve never been to Daggerford Forest,” Mithri said at last. “Heard of it. Traders say it’s dense, wild. Not mapped well. Full of ruins, even older than the elven cities.”

“I don’t like forests,” Hager said. “Trees are too quiet. Make you feel watched.”

Eloanil stared off down the tunnel, eyes shadowed. “I’ve heard whispers of that place. Some say it's where the Veil is thin, where memory walks without bodies. I… don’t like the sound of it.”

“Don’t trust your feelings,” Mithri replied calmly. “Trust your mind. Feelings lie. The mind doesn’t panic when it gets dark.”

Eloanil gave a faint smile. “Says the one who tried to punch a duck.”

They chuckled softly, their laughter echoing faintly through the halls.

Soon, they made their way out of the ruins, the sunlight almost blinding as they stepped back into the world above. The High Moor spread out before them again—vast, rolling, windswept. The path toward the forest lay far to the west, days away by foot.

And so they walked.

Daggerford Forest

Days passed in rhythm—marching by morning, resting at dusk. The sky stretched endlessly, painted with drifting clouds and red-tinged sunsets. The grass whispered around them, and strange birds circled above, always too far to make out.

One evening, they made camp beneath a rocky outcrop where wild thistle grew thick. The fire crackled to life under Hager's practiced hand, and Eloanil wandered nearby, picking herbs from the brush.

Burmir sat on a flat stone, relighting his pipe, belly rumbling as he muttered, "If a pint of dark ale walked through that valley right now, I'd marry it."

"You'd marry a lot of things," Hager said, sharpening his axe. "Most of 'em food."

"Food's more reliable than folk," Burmir replied.

Mithri stood, stretching her arms and pulling out her dagger. "Let's talk blades, I know a trick or two. In a tight space, speed over power. Never wait for an opening—make one."

Hager nodded and shared some of his own knowledge. "Axe is different. You commit. Every swing's a promise. Don't start one you can't finish."

Burmir lifted his spear. "Reach beats flash. Keep 'em outside arm's length, and let the fools bleed trying."

Eloanil returned with a handful of leaves and roots. "I prefer not to fight if I can help it. But if I must—I aim for the wrist or ankle. Drop the weapon, drop the threat."

Mithri gave a grin. "Smart. I'll remember that."

As they shared stories and a few simple practice movements—Mithri showing Burmir a footwork step, Hager demonstrating a reverse swing for close quarters—the fire burned low, casting long shadows into the moor.

Eloanil poured the herb tea into small wooden cups. “It’s bitter,” she warned.

Burmir took a sip, made a face, and grunted. “I’ve had worse. Once drank something from a goblin’s still. This is almost drinkable.”

The night deepened. Stars pierced the sky one by one, and the wind was gentle for once. They sat close around the fire, the flames crackling, the scent of tea and smoke drifting into the dark.

Somewhere ahead, the Daggerford Forest waited, its secrets buried in roots and memory.

But for now, they rested.

The road to the Daggerford Forest stretched far, a journey of soft steps and slow hours, the days marked by rhythm rather than urgency. For nearly half a week they traveled across the western edge of the High Moor, the land flattening slightly before it began to rise into wooded ridges. Each evening brought the same ritual—finding water, catching fish, building small fires. They slept beneath stars that grew brighter with each mile west, their conversations growing longer as the nights grew quieter.

They spoke not of war or relics but of small things—Burmir’s favorite pipeweed blend, Hager’s failed attempt to brew his own ale, Eloanil’s memories of starlit rituals in Sildeyuir, Mithri’s tales of hunting stags in the shadowed groves of Evereska. They laughed more, grew used to each other’s silences, and came to understand one another not just as warriors, but as people who, against all odds, had found something steady in each other.

Then the forest appeared.

They came upon it one evening as twilight began to bleed into the sky. The trees rose like pillars of shadow and moss, their leaves already dripping with a light rain that hissed against the broad leaves. The path narrowed and dipped beneath a tangle of branches, drawing them into a quiet world of green and grey.

The rain fell soft as breath, and the forest smelled of wet bark and turned earth.

That was when they saw her.

A shape ahead on the path. Still. Slumped. The rain pooled around her, mixing with blood and dark mud. It took a moment for them to realize it was an elf—her long hair plastered to her face, her robes torn, her body twisted awkwardly where she had fallen.

Burmir knelt first, turning her gently over. Her face was pale, her lips blue.

“Dead a day, maybe more,” he said grimly.

Hager crouched beside him, checking her belt pouch. “Ten silver. A gold ring. Nothing else.”

Eloanil looked long at her face, brushing damp hair from her brow. “She was no mere traveler. Her robes—forest colors, ceremonial patterns. She could’ve been one of the guardians of this place.”

Mithri narrowed her eyes. “Or a messenger. Something drove her to die out here. Or someone.”

They took turns studying her, hoping for a glimmer of recognition, but none came. Just a sense of unease, and sorrow that deepened with the sound of rain.

“We can’t leave her like this,” Eloanil said quietly. “Not face-down in mud on the path.”

They lifted the elf gently and carried her to a dry patch beneath the roots of a large tree, laying her with care. Eloanil knelt beside her, hands resting over the elf’s chest, and began to speak in soft, measured Elvish.

“Quessir lisse, sina endor lle umien.
Tiriel nai silme ar varya lle vilya.
Anar lle naa, yassen i’ luume caure.
Nai umien gurth, lle autien’ quieta.”

(“Sweet elf, this world you have left behind.
May starlight watch and guard your breath.
The sun is with you, in the hour of sorrow.
May death be gone, and you pass in peace.”)

The rain fell gently through the trees as her voice faded.

They stood in silence for a while after that, heads bowed. The forest did not speak, but its presence was felt—watchful, quiet, as if the trees themselves mourned her passing.

When they turned to the path again, they did so with heavier steps and a deeper sense of purpose.

They had entered the Daggerford Forest.

And it was already clear this place had secrets to give… and blood already spilled.

The forest had grown thicker, more tangled with every step. The footpath they'd followed had slowly narrowed until it simply vanished beneath the underbrush—no sign, no marker, no stones to guide the way. Just wet leaves, twisted roots, and a rising sense of uncertainty.

They stopped at a patch where the trees crowded in, the light dim despite the hour, shadows stretching longer than they should.

Burmir scowled. "This ain't right. It was straight. It *was*. We should've stayed the line."

Hager looked around, arms folded, jaw clenched. "There's no path here, Burmir. We must've missed a turn—should've gone right at the fork."

"There *was* no bloody fork!" Burmir snapped. "Just trees and a stream! You've got the sense of a blind mole."

"Oh aye?" Hager stepped forward, squaring his shoulders. "Well you've got the direction sense of a boot with no sole! You're leadin' us in circles!"

Eloanil raised her hand. "Enough. This place—it's… off. Can't you feel it? The forest doesn't want us here."

"We wouldn't be here," Mithri cut in sharply, "if the two of you didn't stomp around like you're forging roads with your faces."

Hager jabbed a finger at Burmir's chest. "You're the one who said 'straight ahead,' like a drunken badger. You've never even been in a real forest, pipe-smoker!"

Burmir's hands clenched around his spear shaft. "You wanna settle this with fists, forge-boy? Or are you just gonna bark 'til your lungs fall out?"

The next moment happened fast. Hager shoved him—Burmir lunged. The two dwarves crashed into each other like rams, growling, fists flying. They rolled across the mossy ground, cracking branches, until Burmir slammed Hager to the dirt with a heavy thud.

"We should've gone left!" Burmir roared. "I saw the rise! The way the roots curved!"

Hager snarled, struggling beneath him. "There was nothing there but your damned beard in your eyes!"

Eloanil rushed forward, hands outstretched. "Stop this—both of you! You're not yourselves!"

But before she could reach them, Mithri moved fast, grabbing Eloanil's arm and spinning her. "*No!* Don't interfere!"

Eloanil gasped—and then came the slap. A sharp crack that echoed through the trees.

The entire forest seemed to hold its breath.

Eloanil stepped back, her hand on her cheek, eyes wide with hurt and confusion. "Mithri…"

The elven ranger's chest rose and fell quickly, her eyes filled not with reason, but fury. "Don't try to mother us. We're *lost* and you want to *mediate*? We're not in a temple."

The silence that followed was deep—and ugly.

Then Burmir stood, breathing heavily, wiping sweat and leaf mold from his brow. "Something's wrong," he muttered. "I felt… like I wanted to break bones. Yours, Hager. And not just for being wrong."

Hager rolled over and sat up, spitting blood. "Aye. Felt it too. Like fire under the skin."

Eloanil whispered, "This place... it's not just twisted in root. It's twisted in heart."

Mithri turned away, her hands shaking slightly. "I... I didn't mean to—"

But no one said anything else.

The Daggerford Forest was no ordinary place. It bent not just branches, but the soul.

And now, more than ever, they would have to watch not just the shadows beyond—but the ones stirring within.

The air grew heavier with every breath, and the argument still clung to the edges of their words like burrs.

“You don’t know left from the stump of your own arse,” Hager grumbled, eyeing Burmir as if another shove might fix things permanently.

Burmir opened his mouth, ready to spit fire again, but Eloanil held up a hand.

“Enough. Please. Just—*listen* to yourselves.”

Even Mithri, still standing slightly apart, rubbed her temples and muttered, “This forest is poison.”

Then, as if on cue, a wave of exhaustion rolled over them all.

“I... don’t feel right,” Burmir said, his hand loosening on his spear.

“Feels like I haven’t slept in a year,” Hager muttered.

Mithri, ever watchful, suddenly pointed down. “There.”

Beneath the nearest tree, sprouting from the wet moss, were clusters of mushrooms—round, red-dotted with yellow caps. Near them, small blue berries hung from low shrubs.

“I’ve seen these before,” Eloanil said, kneeling. “They’re not poison. In fact, they’re meant to ease fever, even calm the mind. Elven folk call them dreamshades.”

“Well, I could use both,” Burmir said, already plucking one and popping it into his mouth.

The others followed, sitting in a slow circle on the forest floor, chewing mushrooms and berries in silence. The food was earthy, soft, strangely sweet. The world dulled around them.

Then came the heaviness.

They tried to speak, but even the words melted. One by one, they lay back on the soft moss, the forest spinning gently overhead. Leaves swayed in a breeze they no longer heard. Their breathing deepened, their limbs slackened.

And the forest swallowed them in sleep.

Time passed—but not as it should. Days, maybe. Maybe more. Dreams drifted past them, some too faint to recall, some strange and sharp with light.

And then…

A voice. Gentle, cool, like wind through high branches.

“Wake. It’s not your time to vanish here.”

Eyes blinked open. Blurred green above, and kneeling beside them, an elven woman with pale gold hair and moss-green robes. Her eyes shimmered with flecks of silver, and her presence was as still and rooted as an old tree.

“You must come with me,” she said softly. “You do not belong to this forest’s sleep.”

The party, bleary and stiff, slowly sat up.

“Who—where—?” Burmir blinked, squinting. “We sleepin’? Or dead?”

“No,” she said, already standing and moving lightly across the moss. “You’re lucky. The forest nearly claimed your anger as its own. But it left you here for me.”

They followed, still dazed, through winding paths overgrown with vine and silence. And then the forest parted.

A small, hidden enclave revealed itself—houses grown into trees, bridges of root and branch, and small lanterns of silver light dangling like captured stars. The air here was clearer, the oppression lifted, the tension melted into something ancient but peaceful.

They were led into a low, rounded structure made of intertwined trees, where inside the walls were lined with scrolls, maps, and old runes etched in stone and bark.

Seated at the center on a woven mat was an old elf, skin pale as parchment, eyes milky and unseeing—but the moment they stepped inside, he turned his head with perfect accuracy.

“I felt your storm,” he said in a voice both brittle and deep. “You wear the dust of Serpent Hill. I am Caerivon, keeper of lines that cannot be erased.”

“Blind, but sees everything. Elves,” Burmir muttered, quietly.

Caerivon smiled, as though he heard. “And you are Burmir, son of Llorkh, whose blood remembers stone. Sit. You seek what has been hidden… and I remember much.”

The party sat slowly, glancing to each other.

Hager cleared his throat. “You keep maps?”

“I keep memory,” Caerivon said. “Which is all maps are, in the end. Come. Show me what you carry, and I will show you what was lost.”

The forest had not claimed them.

It had delivered them.

Caerivon had listened carefully to the runes they carried, his fingers tracing the edges of the stone tablet from Serpent Hill like a man reading the ridges of time. But when they asked for guidance—direction to where the next piece of the dwarven mystery lay—he had only offered a slow breath and a warning.

“Knowledge is earned,” he said. “Even memory must be protected. Trolls have been pushing into this forest—fouling the streams, snapping the old branches. They come too close to the enclave. Remove them. Show that you can preserve before you seek to uncover.”

So the party departed, guided by a woven thread of bark in Burmir’s hand, enchanted to point toward the trespassers. The thread tugged gently westward, deep into the forest's thicker groves, where the ground turned soft and the trees hunched like watchers.

After half an hour, they reached a moss-covered ridge and dropped behind a line of wet stones. Below, in a small glade dense with mist, squatted a crude camp—broken logs piled for firewood, bones scattered, and three large trolls crouched around a steaming cauldron, the smell of boiling meat thick in the air.

They were massive, all limbs and warts, their skin greenish and pocked like rotting bark. One stirred the cauldron lazily with a thick iron ladle the size of a shovel, while another gnawed on what looked like a deer leg.

The third grunted, voice low and wet.

“I say we take another elf next time. The skinny ones taste stringy, but the fat ones always run fast. I like the chase.”

The one with the ladle replied, “Tired of elf. Want badger again. Crunchy. Makes teeth sing.”

The gnawing troll laughed, bits of meat flying from his mouth. “We eat what we catch. Forest’s full of bite-things. Mushy ones, crunchy ones. ‘Cept birds. Birds poop too much.”

Burmir nodded to the others. “That’s our cue.”

They struck fast.

Mithri loosed two arrows before her boots hit the moss—one embedding in a troll’s neck, the other skimming off thick skin. Hager roared, axe raised, charging into the clearing like a boulder with eyes.

Burmir followed with a sweeping thrust of his spear, jabbing into the stomach of the ladle-wielding troll just as it turned. It howled and swiped wildly, catching Hager mid-charge and sending him flying head-first into the boiling cauldron with a sickening *clang*. The pot tipped, stew splashing everywhere, steam hissing.

“*Son of a crone’s beard!*” Hager bellowed, pulling his head out, soup clinging to his beard and face, rage in his eyes.

Mithri dodged a clumsy troll swipe, only to be smacked full in the face by the heavy iron ladle. She hit the ground hard, groaning, blood streaming from her nose.

Eloanil raised her hands to cast a spell—but the third troll barreled into her, slamming her into a jagged boulder. Her back arched with the impact, and she slid down, coughing blood, vision swimming.

“Eloanil!” Burmir snarled, charging forward with a renewed fury. He plunged his spear into the troll’s thigh, twisting as he ripped it free. The creature roared and swung down, but Burmir ducked under it, ramming the spear again—this time through its gut and into the earth.

Hager, half-drenched in soup and seething, launched himself at the troll who'd hit Mithri. His axe crashed into its spine with a bone-cracking crunch. The troll spun, but Hager hooked its leg and brought it down with a roar, then buried the axe into its neck until it stopped twitching.

Mithri, recovering, grabbed her fallen dagger and dove beneath the final troll, slashing behind its knees. As it stumbled forward, Eloanil, battered but conscious, muttered a final incantation and cast a blast of searing light from her palm—striking the troll in the face and igniting its eyes in holy fire. It fell, thrashing, then went still.

The glade was silent.

The cauldron steamed quietly, its contents now mixed with troll blood and ash. The moss was slick with gore.

Hager spat stew. "If I smell like onions for a week, I'm killing Caerivon."

Mithri wiped blood from her cheek. "I think my nose is broken."

Eloanil groaned, leaning on a rock. "We won. That's what matters."

Burmir yanked his spear from the twitching troll and muttered, "Trolls always take more than you expect."

They stood in the carnage, bruised and bleeding—but victorious.

They had earned their memory.

The forest seemed gentler on their return. The light filtering through the trees had taken on a softer hue, the air clearer, almost grateful. The path led them back to the hidden enclave without resistance, as if the trees now recognized them, or at least chose not to oppose them.

They arrived at Caerivon's dwelling near dusk, weary but alive. The blind elf archivist sat exactly where they'd left him, as still as the stones around him. He turned his head slightly when they entered, his unseeing eyes seeming to meet each of theirs in turn.

"You return," he said, voice low and knowing. "You carry bruises, but also purpose. The forest let you live. That means something."

"We carry more than bruises," Hager muttered, rubbing a welt on his shoulder. "Smell like troll stew."

"Trolls gone," Burmir added, flopping down on a mossy cushion. "Cauldron's still steaming, if anyone's brave enough."

Caerivon offered the faintest smile. "Then you've earned what you came for."

He turned to a curved wall where scrolls were stored in bark tubes and lifted one with practiced ease.

“Before the trolls came too close, I received word. Rumors from a ranger’s hawk—flames in the Trollclaws, cloaked figures wearing the mark of the Ashen Flame. They dig among the old graves. Seek what should not be touched.”

Burmir’s brow furrowed. “That’s near enough to be concernin’. If they’re already searching out there, we may be behind.”

“You are on time,” Caerivon said. “But only barely. You must go soon. Tonight, you rest. Tomorrow, you follow the old road east.”

That evening, the party gathered under the great trees of the enclave where lanterns hung like stars and the scent of herbs and woodsmoke filled the air. The elves had prepared a pot of mushroom soup—thick with forest roots, wild leeks, and soft, chewy tubers—and poured them cups of deep crimson forest berry wine.

Burmir slurped noisily, then leaned back and struck a match against his belt buckle to light his pipe. “Not bad. Still miss the bite of dwarf mead, though.”

Mithri sipped her wine, eyes half-lidded. “Elven drink has more patience. Less kick. More... sleep.”

“I’ll take sleep,” Eloanil said, stretching out her sore limbs. “Every joint in my body feels like it’s been rearranged.”

Hager grinned over the rim of his wooden bowl. “You should’ve tried being soup. I think I left half my beard in that pot.”

They laughed, the tension of the fight melting into the warmth of food and fire. The enclave hummed softly around them—distant elven voices, the trickle of water over stones, the rustle of unseen creatures in the trees above.

“Strange, isn’t it,” Mithri murmured, “how fast a campfire can feel like home.”

Burmir puffed a long draw from his pipe, letting the smoke curl toward the stars. “Aye. Just don’t let it fool you. The road waits. And it’s not gonna be so kind.”

Eloanil looked into the flames, quiet for a long moment.

“We’ll face it. Together.”

The fire crackled. The wine warmed them from within. And for one night, they rested like old friends beneath the trees—before the next march into darker lands.

Morning came slowly in the forest, light dripping through the high canopy like golden sap. Mist clung to the ground in thin layers, swirling around their boots as the party gathered once more in the heart of the elven enclave. Caerivon waited for them in the same place he always seemed to be—seated among the roots and scrolls, hands folded.

“This,” he said, holding out a narrow strip of bark covered in etched runes, “is a partial translation of the key. Dwarven, but laced with ancient elven sigils. You will need it to enter

Duramad's Vault—when you find it. It is not complete, but it will open the path. If the Vault still stands, it will recognize the blood of those who once sealed it."

Burmir took the bark gently, nodding with a rare solemnity. "We'll use it well. No part of this falls into the hands of the Ashen Flame."

"Then go," Caerivon said, blind eyes turning toward the breeze. "The road to the Trollclaws is long. The fire creeps closer every day."

They ate once more before leaving—thick slices of herb bread and roasted mushrooms, warm broth in wooden bowls, and another generous helping of berry wine. Strength in their bones, they packed quietly and bowed in thanks to the elves.

By midmorning, they were back on the trail. This time, the forest felt different—brighter. The sun pushed gently through the branches above, casting long bands of light over the mossy floor. Birds had returned, trilling and flitting among the leaves, and the air smelled less of damp and more of pine.

Two hours in, the path curved along a rocky slope where the forest parted briefly, revealing a jagged cave mouth tucked behind a curtain of vines. Burmir spotted it first and held up a hand.

"Cave. Might be a good place to rest the feet, take a bite."

They ducked beneath the vines and stepped inside, the cool air like a breath from underground. The space opened wide, then narrowed into three separate tunnels leading deeper.

They sat just inside the mouth of the rightmost tunnel, passing around a waterskin filled with the last of the wine. Hager chewed noisily on a piece of elven bread and said, "Still can't tell if this tastes like fruit or leather."

"It's both," Mithri replied, sipping slowly. "That's the point."

They didn't plan to explore—but curiosity won, as it often did.

The right tunnel was narrow, curving downward, damp and echoing. They lit a torch and stepped into the dark.

Twenty paces in, the smell changed—thick, musty, like mold and old silk. The walls shimmered with thin strands of web. That was when it struck.

With a hiss and a blast of sticky sound, a large spider dropped from above and spat a thick stream of webbing directly into Mithri's face. She cried out, stumbling back, arms flailing, unable to see.

"I'm blind!" she shouted, clawing at the mess covering her eyes.

Smaller spiders swarmed from holes in the walls—pale and fast, clicking with their needle-like legs. Eloanil raised her hand and cast a flash of radiant light that scorched one of them mid-leap, its body curling as it shrieked and collapsed in smoke.

Burmir rammed his spear into the first spider, catching it just behind the mandibles and pinning it to the wall—but the creature writhed and bit at him, leaving a gash across his forearm.

Hager hacked at the swarm with wide, brutal swings of his axe, clearing space around Mithri while shouting, “Hold still, I’ll cut it off your face!”

“*Don’t you dare!*” she shouted back.

The large spider, wounded but not finished, leapt toward Eloanil, landing on her shoulder with a screech. Its legs wrapped around her, mandibles clacking. She screamed and fell, slamming the spider against the cave wall again and again until it released her.

Burmir stomped forward and impaled it clean through the back, twisting the spear until it stopped moving.

Mithri finally tore the webbing from her face, blinking furiously. “Ugh, it *tasted* me! I could feel it deciding!”

With the last of the smaller spiders crushed beneath axe and boot, silence fell.

Burmir wiped the tip of his spear clean. “Remind me next time I say ‘let’s poke around a cave,’ just slap me.”

Eloanil, bruised and breathless, lit another torch and steadied herself. “We should go. This place is thick with worse than spiders.”

The cave groaned slightly around them, like something deeper had heard the noise.

Back beneath the trees and on the edge of the cave mouth, the forest light still struggled to pierce the shadows. But Burmir wasn’t thinking of light—his eyes had a strange gleam, the kind that spoke of gold and hidden things.

He stood apart from the others, staring back toward the darkness of the cave tunnels, his hand tightening on the haft of his spear. “There’s more in there,” he muttered. “I *know* it.”

Mithri, wiping spider guts from her blade, gave him a sidelong glance. “We already had our share of web and poison. You want more of that?”

Burmir’s gaze was fixed and burning. “There’s tunnels, deeper ones. You saw how old the stone was back there—older than elven paths. Could be something buried, something valuable. I’ve had a sense for this since I was a whelp pokin’ at rocks with a soup spoon.”

Eloanil sighed, weary but curious. “If we find something cursed, I’ll make you drink it.”

Even Hager gave in with a grunt. “Fine. But if this ends in another cauldron, you’re gettin’ cooked in it.”

They lit fresh torches and turned back inside, this time taking the second tunnel—lower, damper, the air cooler as the stone descended in winding, uneven paths. They walked for near half an hour, turning at narrow junctions, the map of their passage already tangled in their minds.

Then, footsteps.

A small figure shuffled toward them from a side tunnel—no taller than Burmir’s waist, with wiry limbs, a hooked nose, and green skin splotched with grime. A goblin, wearing patchwork leather and a half-torn scarf around her neck.

“Well now,” she said, her voice oily and thick with false cheer, “look what the cave dripped in. You’re lost, I’ll wager. You folks need a place to rest? Warm spot, maybe a bite? Yes?”

Burmir narrowed his eyes. “You’re alone?”

The goblin gave a twitchy laugh. “Just little me. But we’ve got space. Quiet place. No webs. Just company. Come, come!”

They exchanged glances—every instinct screamed trap, but curiosity and caution battled for dominance. Ultimately, they followed.

The path curved one last time and opened into a wide cavern, lit by crude fire pits and lined with damp, moss-covered stone. Eight goblins were gathered here, some squatting around bones—gnawing, cackling, tossing scraps into the fire. Some looked up, sniffed the air like wolves, eyes gleaming.

Near the back, seated on a throne of stacked crates and scavenged iron, was a goblin wearing a makeshift crown—interwoven wood, string, jagged scrap metal, and the top half of a human skull. He grinned as they entered.

“Well, well. Meat with weapons. What’s the occasion?”

The goblins around them rose slowly. Eight of them, armed with clubs, bent daggers, and crude swords.

The goblin boss pointed. “Take their feet first. That way they don’t run.”

The fight exploded.

Burmir surged forward with a growl, spear sweeping wide to catch the first goblin across the chest, sending it tumbling back with a shriek. Hager was already in motion, his axe cleaving downward into a goblin’s shoulder and driving it to the floor in a spray of black blood.

Mithri ducked low, her short sword flashing—she slid beneath a club swing and drove her blade into a goblin’s gut, twisting before pulling it free. Eloanil muttered a spell, radiant light bursting from her hand to blind two goblins mid-lunge.

One goblin leapt onto Burmir’s back, stabbing wildly at his shoulder. He roared, slammed backward into the stone wall, and crushed the creature flat.

The goblin boss leapt down from his throne and came at Hager with surprising speed, swinging a spiked club with wild fury. He struck Hager’s forearm, cracking the bracer and forcing him to drop his axe.

“You’ll wear my crown next!” the boss howled.

Hager headbutted him in return, grabbing the club and wrenching it from the goblin’s grip. “You’ll wear my boot in your teeth.”

Eloanil fended off two goblins at once, staff swinging wide, knocking one back before a dagger slipped past and cut across her ribs. She cried out, staggered, and unleashed a burst of light again—this time scorching both goblins into dust.

Mithri landed a clean strike across the legs of a goblin who was charging Burmir, while Burmir brought his spear down like a hammer, pinning another to the floor.

Only the boss remained, bleeding from the temple, snarling, crown askew.

Burmir stood before him, spear raised.

“Go on then,” the boss spat. “Finish it.”

Burmir answered by running the spear clean through his chest, planting him against the crate-throne.

Silence returned, save for their heavy breathing and the crackle of the goblins’ cooking fires.

They stood in a room of smoke and ash, bodies strewn about like broken toys.

Hager retrieved his axe and shook blood from his arm. “No treasure, huh?”

Burmir sniffed, already eyeing the crates. “We’ll see about that.”

With the goblins vanquished and their rancid cooking fires dying out in smoky sputters, the party turned their attention to the pile of crates near the back of the cavern—the so-called “throne” of the goblin boss. Burmir pried one open with the butt of his spear, and the scent of mold and decay wafted out immediately.

Inside, just as expected, was a bizarre collection of worthless junk.

“A human hand,” Hager muttered, lifting it gingerly by one finger and tossing it aside with a grunt. “Charming.”

Eloanil pulled out a blackened spider leg, long as her arm. “This is revolting.”

Mithri examined a bundle of dented wooden mugs, one with a mouse skeleton stuck in the bottom. “At least they stayed hydrated.”

But then Burmir reached into the bottom of one crate and grinned. “Now what do we have here…”

He pulled out a worn leather coin pouch and loosened the drawstring—inside were twenty gold pieces, dull but real. Nestled beside it lay a silver necklace tangled with a leather strap, and beneath that, twenty small copper rings, crudely hammered and misshapen, clearly goblin handiwork.

“Not much, but enough to say the day wasn’t a complete loss,” Burmir muttered, pocketing the pouch.

Eloanil took the necklace, rubbing it clean on her sleeve. “This has age to it. Not goblin work. Might’ve been stolen.”

They searched the rest of the cavern but found nothing of worth—only bones, bits of cloth, and empty eyesockets staring from piles too old to disturb. With nothing more to take, they retraced their steps back through the webbed corridors and emerged once more into the daylight.

The forest felt brighter now—almost welcome after the dark and foulness of the cave. They followed the path a while longer, birdsong returning above and the scent of pine mixing with damp loam. But as they reached a clearing, the footpath once again disappeared—swallowed by brush and root.

“No path again,” Mithri muttered, scanning the trees. “Either this forest hates roads, or we’re going in circles.”

“We keep going forward,” Burmir said. “Can’t be far from the edge. The Trollclaws should be near.”

Eloanil looked to the canopy, brows furrowed. “This place shifts. Paths turn where they shouldn’t. It’s like the forest *moves*.”

They pushed through the underbrush, branches catching on cloaks and boots sinking in soft earth. Eventually, they came to a cluster of flat stones—some possibly placed, others naturally formed—and sat to catch their breath.

The woods were quiet around them, save for wind through leaves and the occasional creak of an unseen limb.

Eloanil stared out into the trees and spoke softly. “There are stories of this place. Old elven tales. They say the forest listens—and remembers.”

Burmir raised an eyebrow. “Remembers what?”

“Things that walk through it. Blood spilled. Promises broken. There’s a story of a war-band of men who hunted an elven priestess here. They say she died, and with her last breath, she cursed the trees to twist and turn so that her killers would never find their way home.”

Hager grunted. “Sounds like what’s happening to us.”

“There’s more,” Eloanil continued. “Another tale, even older, speaks of a tree deep in the forest whose roots grow around a broken sword. They say if you sleep near it, you dream of every battle fought in this land—and sometimes, the dead come walking in your sleep.”

“Is that supposed to *help* us sleep tonight?” Mithri asked, only half-joking.

Eloanil gave a faint smile. “No. But it reminds me that this forest has seen more than we’ll ever understand. It isn’t cruel—it’s old. And it doesn’t forget.”

They sat in silence, each of them looking into the green and gold shadows stretching all around them.

Then Burmir stood, knocking ash from his pipe. “Well, if we’re lost, we might as well keep being lost forward.”

And so they rose, tightened straps, checked weapons, and pressed deeper into the whispering wild.

The deeper they pushed into the woods, the quieter the forest grew, as if the very leaves were holding their breath. Burmir walked a step ahead, his eyes scanning every gnarled trunk, every strange rise of roots.

“That tree you spoke of,” he said to Eloanil. “With the sword. Let’s find it. If there’s truth to that tale, we should see it with our own eyes.”

Eloanil hesitated. “It’s not meant to be found. The stories say it appears only to those who don’t look for it.”

Burmir smirked. “Then maybe I’m lookin’ just wrong enough.”

They wandered for hours, the forest tightening around them, growing darker though the sun still lingered. Eventually, they stepped into a clearing that felt *older* than the rest of the world. Time seemed to slow as they approached.

At the heart of the clearing stood the tree.

It was immense—its trunk wider than a cottage, bark knotted like ancient flesh, and its roots twisted across the ground like petrified serpents. Tangled tightly in the roots, just visible beneath a mass of moss and vine, was the broken blade of a great sword. It jutted at an angle, cracked near the hilt, but unmistakable in its craftsmanship. The roots had claimed it completely, wrapped around it as if protecting—or imprisoning—it.

The party moved closer.

Mithri reached out to brush away some of the moss near the sword when the ground beneath her feet shifted.

In the next breath, a massive root surged from the soil, wrapping around her waist and yanking her high into the air. She let out a cry, then gasped as another thick branch coiled around her neck, squeezing.

“Mithri!” Eloanil shouted.

Her feet kicked, her hands clawing at the living wood as she gasped for air, face flushed and eyes wide.

Hager ran forward and swung his axe at the root—but it bounced off like he’d struck iron.

“Damned thing’s *alive!*” he growled. “And it won’t bleed!”

Burmir stabbed upward with his spear, but the branch holding Mithri didn’t flinch. “Mithri, *hold on!*”

“She can’t breathe!” Eloanil cried, pulling out a blade to hack at the bark, but her strikes left no mark.

“*Let her go, you overgrown twig heap!*” Hager bellowed.

Then came a sound.

A low groan, deeper than any wind, older than thunder. The tree *spoke*.

“Mírun-thaelé varun... thúr ethel dorae...”

A language none of them recognized—a rolling rhythm like stone cracking and water rushing underground.

The roots shifted, tighter for a moment—Mithri choked, her voice strangled to nothing.

Then, silence.

Eyes opened on the tree's trunk—two great golden eyes, deep and wise, rimmed with dark bark. They blinked slowly, as if returning from centuries of dreaming.

The tree's massive voice rumbled again, this time in slow, creaking Elvish.

"Who are you… intruders? Did you come to cut me down? Why do you strike my branches?"

The party stood frozen.

"*Put her down!*" Hager shouted, stepping forward, axe raised. "Now!"

The tree gave a sound like a chuckle—dry and hollow, like wind in a tomb.

"I could snap her in half and scatter her bones to the moss. And yet… I have not."

Its eyes turned toward Mithri, still dangling, her breath shallow and fast.

"She smells of leaf and bowstring… she reminds me of those who once walked these woods. The old ones. The moon-folk. Their song lingers on her."

Burmir stepped forward carefully. "We didn't mean harm. She was only tryin' to look at the sword. We heard stories about you."

"Many stories have been told," the tree murmured. "Few of them true. And fewer still remembered."

It fell silent then, great eyes blinking slowly again, lost in thought as ancient memory flickered behind its gaze.

The forest held its breath again. The sword gleamed faintly beneath the roots.

And Mithri hung, waiting for the tree to remember whether it was friend… or judge.

The tree was silent for a long while, its old eyes unmoving, staring somewhere far beyond the forest, beyond time. The roots still held Mithri aloft, but the grip on her neck eased just enough for her to breathe, shallow and strained.

Then the voice returned—so deep it seemed to vibrate in the very soil.

"Long ago, in a time before your wars, before your maps and kingdoms, there was a blade called *Varethuil*—the Severing Star. Forged not by dwarves nor elves, but by something between. A child of stone and shadow. It was a sword made to end oaths."

The party stood frozen as the tale unfurled like ancient smoke.

"It was first wielded by a mortal king who slew his own blood to take a throne. Then it passed to a woman of flame, who used it to burn a grove of dreamers. Every hand it touched turned black with regret. It whispered betrayal, fed on broken vows. When the last bearer—a hero of the twilight border—fell to madness, they brought the blade to me."

The eyes of the tree darkened. “She was elven. She wept as she laid it at my roots and asked me to keep it. To hold it where no hands could reach. She gave her life to seal it here.”

Burmir’s grip on his spear tightened.

“But time does not forget. And now you’ve stirred its hunger again. If you want your friend to live,” the tree said, its voice hardening, “you will take the sword. You will cast it into the lake that remembers no names. If you do not, I will break her back, and she will die beneath the branches.”

“No choice, then,” Hager said, already moving toward the roots.

The others followed, and for long hours they worked—hacking, sawing, and prying at the roots that gripped the sword like fingers carved from the mountain itself. Sweat soaked their armor, and their hands blistered from the effort. All the while, the tree watched in silence.

Finally, with one last groaning crack, the roots split, and the sword pulled free.

The moment it left the earth, the air turned bitter cold.

The blade gleamed unnaturally—black steel etched with fading runes, its edges jagged like shattered ice. As Burmir grasped the hilt, a scream not heard with ears rang through his mind. His knees buckled, eyes wide.

Mist spilled across the clearing.

The forest vanished.

He stood alone, surrounded by gray fog, and through it marched a legion of the dead. Elves with empty sockets, dwarves with axes rusted in bone hands, men with broken crowns, all walking in silence toward him.

He turned to run but the fog closed in. The sword pulsed in his hand, heavier with every breath. It dragged his arm low like it meant to pull him into the earth.

"*Get to the lake…*" a voice said—his voice, but not.

He fought through the mist, stumbling, each step like marching through a dream. Branches grasped at him, shadows lunged, faces flickered in the gloom. He didn't know how long he ran—minutes or hours—but then he saw it.

A lake. Perfectly still. Black as ink. It reflected no sky.

He raised the sword with trembling arms.

"*Take it!*" he screamed, and hurled the blade with all his might.

The cursed sword spun through the air and vanished beneath the surface with no sound, no ripple.

The moment it sank, the mist tore apart like silk in the wind.

The sun returned.

Burmir stood at the lake's edge, breathless, his skin cold and his chest aching.

He went back to the tree. The voice returned, low and cracking, like dry bark splitting.

"One last task before the bowstring is released. You have done a great deed, casting the Severing Star into the water that forgets. But I thirst. I have *thirsted* for many years."

The tree's branches creaked mournfully, and the party could see it now—how the outer limbs hung brittle and gray, some broken and splintered like dead fingers.

"No rain has graced this glade. The roots grow tired. If you wish to see your companion live, you will bring me water from the lake. Not in skins or buckets. You must cut the earth, give me a path to drink once more."

Burmir wiped his forehead, still pale from the sword's vision. "You *really* could've said that before we ripped the cursed blade out of your spine."

"Burmir," Eloanil said sharply. "Not the time."

"We'll do it," Hager growled, already cracking a sapling in two. "Let's dig."

They gathered sharp stones, broken branches, and crafted rough poles with pointed ends. Using the lake's position as their guide, they marked a path—uphill at first, then gently curving, toward the roots of the ancient tree. Then they dug. It was no small task.

The earth was dry, packed hard, and tangled with shallow roots and stone. For hours they slashed, hacked, gouged the soil, carving a shallow ditch deep enough to carry water. Their hands blistered, their arms ached, and their tempers wore thin again.

But they pressed on.

When the first trickle of water slid down the groove, it felt like salvation. By mid-afternoon, the ditch was flowing—a slow, glistening ribbon winding toward the clearing. When it reached the roots, the tree shuddered, its bark cracking with sound like a deep breath after drowning.

The branch holding Mithri loosened gently.

She dropped to the moss with a groan, caught by Eloanil, her face still flushed and bruised, but alive.

The tree's eyes blinked slowly. Its voice came again—softer now, like leaves rustling.

"You have quenched more than thirst. You have healed memory. For this, I offer a gift."

Its great roots shifted with thunderous groans, pulling apart the soil. Beneath them, revealed like bones from a grave, lay a small pile of gold coins, tangled with silver necklaces, brooches of amber and pearl, and rings that shimmered with faint enchantment.

"Take what you need. But take only what you respect. These are the gifts left behind by those who once loved me."

Burmir stepped forward, inspecting the hoard with reverence.

"I'd say there's enough here to call a good day's work." He began counting quickly, dwarf-trained eyes catching coin by coin. "'Bout 240 gold pieces, give or take. Might pay for a hot bath and some armor mending."

The tree spoke again, and its voice now rang with something almost like pride.

"You will each take a ring. I remember what each of you has done. I name them now."

A vine curled out of the treasure pile and lifted four rings, placing one in front of each of them.

"Burmir, bearer of the Severing Star—yours is *Tharnak's Binding*. It will strengthen your endurance.

"Hager, unshaken in fury—yours is *The Iron Oath*. Let it guide your hand in strength."

"Eloanil, light in the shadowed wood—yours is *The Moonroot Band*. It sharpens the mind that heals. "

"Mithri, whose breath returned with mercy—yours is *The Ring of the Silver Bow*. May your grace strike swifter. "

The rings shimmered with a faint pulse as they placed them on their fingers, each one strangely warm to the touch, humming gently as if in recognition.

The tree said no more.

Its roots settled, and its eyes closed for the last time that day—resting now, drinking in the water long denied.

And the party, heavier in coin and purpose, gathered their gear once more and turned to the forest beyond. The Trollclaws lay ahead, and the fire was moving still.

They left the clearing slowly, casting backward glances at the old tree now silent and still, its roots settled and watered, its gift already weighing in their packs and hearts alike. The forest around them didn't feel hostile anymore, but it was no more helpful either. The path vanished again beneath brambles and moss, and before long, the party realized they were drifting.

The trees thickened. The light thinned. Their steps slowed.

"Are we sure we're not walking in a big circle?" Mithri muttered, flicking a burr from her cloak.

Burmir let out a long breath and sat down on a soft patch of moss beneath a crooked pine. "The forest's a damn maze. No sun, no stars, no markers. Just roots, shadows, and stories."

He struck a match, lit his pipe, and puffed until the warm scent of tobacco filled the air. The others sat too, weary and sore from the digging, the curse, the fight.

"We could climb a tree, look for a clearing," Hager suggested.

"With your armor?" Eloanil smirked. "You'll bring the whole tree down."

"I say we go where the moss grows thickest," Burmir said. "North side of trees, right?"

"Unless this forest plays its own rules," Mithri replied. "Which it clearly does."

As they debated, a whisper of movement came from behind the nearby trunks.

"*Stay where you are.*"

Two arrows aimed at them from the shadows—two sleek longbows held by two wood elves, a woman and a man, stepping into view like the forest itself had shaped them. Cloaked in brown and green, their hair braided with feathers and bone, they moved without sound.

The woman's eyes were like frost on leaves. "Who are you to wander here, strangers? What do you want from the forest?"

The man said nothing, only shifted his stance, drawing his bowstring tighter.

Burmir raised his hands, pipe still smoking between his fingers. "We're lost. We came from the heartwood clearing. Spoke with a tree that remembers. And before that, from Caerivon."

That name landed like a pebble in still water. The elves exchanged a look.

“You know Caerivon?” the woman asked.

“We drank his wine and fought his trolls,” Hager grunted.

The man lowered his bow first. The woman followed. “Then you are no threat,” she said. “I am Iri. This is Ul. We watch these woods for those who would foul them.”

“Glad to meet watchers with arrows instead of thorns,” Burmir muttered.

Iri turned and gestured for them to follow. “You walk in the forest’s folds. Few escape them alone. Come. We will guide you to the edge.”

As they walked through the winding brush and over old stone roots, Iri spoke softly.

“These woods are old. Before the humans built roads and stone walls, before the dwarves cut tunnels, we walked here. We remember the time of quiet. The time when the trees spoke without fear.”

Ul said little, only nodded from time to time.

“They say the first elves here grew from the trees themselves,” Iri continued. “Not born, but shaped. They carried no names, only songs. Now we are what’s left. We guard the breath of the forest. When it dies, we will die with it.”

The party listened, tired and solemn.

After some hours, the trees began to thin. The canopy opened. And then they saw it—the sunlit edge of the forest, where grass met an old cobbled road stretching eastward into the hills.

The Trollclaws waited in the far distance.

Ul and Iri stopped just before the treeline.

“This is as far as we go,” Iri said. “The wild knows your steps now. Walk carefully.”

“We will,” Eloanil said, bowing her head.

The party stepped into the light, blinking at the brightness, the breeze now wide and clear. Behind them, the trees stood tall and quiet, the forest watching always.

The road waited.

And they walked it.

The Trade Way road stretched for days beneath tired boots and endless sky. Hills rolled past, sometimes green and gentle, sometimes grey with stone. The wind howled at night, and the

Trollclaws loomed larger on the horizon with every passing dawn. But for now, it was the smoke from a crooked chimney and the sight of a weather-worn sign that brought relief.

“The Old Wagon Inn,” Burmir read aloud as they approached. The sign dangled from a rusted iron hook, depicting a rickety cart missing a wheel. The building sagged slightly but stood proud enough, lanterns flickering beside the door, the smell of roasting meat already in the air.

They entered like pilgrims to a shrine. The common room was dim, cozy—mismatched chairs, thick beams overhead, and a handful of travel-worn patrons muttering over mugs. A

fire crackled in the hearth. The barmaid behind the counter had strong shoulders and a face that said she'd thrown out her share of drunks.

Eloanil stepped up to the bar. "Four plates of hot food, please—whatever's cooking. And four ales."

The barmaid nodded. "Boar stew and root mash. Ales are dark."

"Perfect," Eloanil said with a tired smile.

They took a table near the hearth and slumped into the chairs like stones into mud.

"I swear if that stew's even *lukewarm*, I'll cry," Mithri said, rubbing her calves.

"I'll drink her tears if they're as warm as that ale smells," Burmir said, pulling out his pipe and lighting it. He took a deep pull, then grabbed the mug placed in front of him and downed it in one gulp.

He set the empty mug on the table with a mighty **croak** that made nearby heads turn.

"Better," he said, stroking his beard. "World's less stupid now."

Hager chuckled, sniffing the steam rising from his bowl. "Still think about that soup I wore in the goblin den."

"I still smell it sometimes," Mithri said, smirking.

"You *still* smell like it," Eloanil replied, earning a half-hearted scowl.

They laughed, ate, drank, and for a short while, they were simply travelers enjoying warmth.

A gnome approached their table from the corner table of the inn.

He was short, even for a gnome, with a wiry black beard and thick spectacles that made his eyes appear twice their size. He carried a leather satchel stuffed with little metal contraptions that ticked and clicked softly.

"Evenin' to you, brave company!" he said with cheer as he approached. "May a curious mind interrupt your fine digestion?"

Burmir eyed him suspiciously. "If you're selling feet ointment, turn around."

"No no no!" the gnome laughed, setting a small brass disk on the table. It began to tick.

"Behold: the *Astroturn*! A finely calibrated device that uses a rotating gear track and a lunar wheel to predict the current phase of the moon, the tide leanings, and even the season. All through movement and celestial patterns!"

Hager leaned forward, squinting. "You mean this thing tells the time?"

“Of the *month*, my good sir,” the gnome said with a wink. “Note the tiny ring here—days! The outer wheel—months! When you adjust the dial according to starlight, it repositions to show you the *seasonal drift*. All that for ten silver. A marvel of science.”

Eloanil raised a brow. “Does it sing lullabies too?”

“Only if you’re very lonely,” the gnome said.

Hager picked it up, turned the dial, watched as the inner gears clicked slowly. After a moment of muttering and some head scratching, he finally nodded. “I get it. It’s clever.”

He handed over ten silver. “I’ll take one.”

“Ah, a connoisseur of cogs and stars!” The gnome beamed. “And may I interest you in my *Wind Flask*? Always cold on the inside, warm on the outside! Or my *Fog Scope*—a lens that can pierce low mist up to thirty paces!”

Burmir grunted. “Do you sell a compass that doesn’t lie in cursed forests?”

The gnome paused. “Not yet. But that’s... that’s a good idea.”

He scribbled something in a small notebook.

“I’ll think on it.”

They shared another round, the gnome eventually scuttling off to peddle his wares elsewhere. The fire burned low, and the stew left their bellies warm.

And for the first time in days, they felt safe.

At least for one night.

Trollclaws

The warmth of the inn faded behind them like a half-remembered dream. After full bellies, an evening of smoke, ale, and strange gadgets, the party had retired to a single room with four beds, where their snores quickly filled the quiet inn rafters. Burmir slept like a fallen log, pipe still in his mouth. Hager muttered war cries in his sleep. Mithri tossed and turned, her dreams edged with trees and serpents. Eloanil, as always, slept lightly.

By dawn, the smell of fried eggs and oatcakes lured them to the common room again. They ate in comfortable silence, took one last gulp of watered wine, packed their gear, and headed back to the road.

By midday, the Trollclaws greeted them.

The landscape changed fast.

The rolling green was gone, replaced by jagged ridges, cracked earth, and gnarled, stunted trees that seemed to claw at the sky. The air was dry and still, the wind biting even in sunlight. Pale, thorny bushes clustered in places, and great boulders jutted from the earth like the bones of long-dead beasts. The trail was barely a trail—more suggestion than road.

“This place,” Burmir muttered, “looks like someone tried to farm nightmares.”

They made their way slowly, watching every ledge and shadow, boots sliding on loose gravel and broken stone. Around midday, just as they crested a low ridge.

A sharp whistle cut through the stillness.

“Down!” Mithri shouted, but it was already too late.

Three figures burst from behind a cluster of stone—lean, sharp-faced goblins with patchwork armor and jagged blades. From above, two more leapt down from a ledge, ropes in hand. One landed hard on Burmir, sending him tumbling, while another lashed a rope around Eloanil’s wrist, yanking her sideways.

Hager roared, drawing his axe, and slammed the flat of it into the goblin on Burmir, sending it sprawling. Mithri fired a quick arrow, striking the rope binding Eloanil and freeing her before she rolled to her feet and cast a radiant blast that blinded the nearest ambusher.

Two more goblins charged from behind the rocks—one throwing a net that caught Mithri mid-step, sending her crashing to the dirt.

Burmir rose with a growl, head bleeding from a stone strike. He grabbed his spear, spun, and drove it into the gut of the goblin still trying to recover. “You picked the *wrong* hill!”

Hager faced two at once, blocking sword strikes with his bracers and using his size to push one off balance. With a powerful twist, he hooked the axe behind the goblin’s knee and dropped it, finishing it with a downward strike.

Mithri, entangled, kicked out and drew her dagger, slicing the net open and driving her blade upward into the armpit of the goblin standing over her.

Eloanil staggered back from a swinging club, blood running from her lip. She shouted a prayer to Sehanine, and a pulse of radiant light exploded outward, throwing two goblins to the rocks, unconscious or dead.

The last goblin—realizing the fight had turned—turned to flee.

Hager threw his axe.

It spun through the air, struck the creature between the shoulder blades, and sent it sprawling.

Silence returned.

The Trollclaws echoed with the sound of heavy breaths, the metallic scent of blood rising in the dry wind.

“Ambush in the claws,” Burmir said, wiping blood from his temple. “That’s a song title.”

“They were waiting,” Eloanil murmured. “Watching. This won’t be the last.”

Mithri stood, brushing blood from her cheek. “Then we stay sharp. Or we don’t stay.”

The party gathered their breath, retrieved weapons, and pressed on into the stone-clawed wild.

The Trollclaws were awake.

The trail turned cruel beneath their boots. The sun dipped low behind the ragged hills, casting long shadows like reaching claws. The Trollclaws were unforgiving—sharp ridges that offered little cover, uneven ground that made ankles ache, and the constant sense that something watched from just beyond the edge of vision.

They walked for hours, dust caking their boots and sweat drying beneath their armor. Every so often they stopped—just for a few breaths, a swig of ale from a waterskin, or a long draw from Burmir's ever-present pipe.

At one such stop, Hager sat on a warm rock and pulled something from his pack: a small, freshly carved pipe of knotted pine, still smelling faintly of sap. He held it up to Burmir like a proud apprentice.

"Well? Think this'll carry the fire?"

Burmir squinted at it, took it in hand, inspected the stem and bowl. "Bit crude," he said, stuffing it with a pinch of pipeweed, "but it'll smoke."

He handed it back, already lit, and Hager puffed tentatively, then coughed like he'd swallowed a bee.

Mithri smirked. "Looks natural on you. Like a bear trying to play the harp."

"Bah." Hager wiped his eyes. "You all laugh, but I'll get used to it. Beats walking with nothing but your thoughts."

"Your thoughts have smoke now," Burmir said, grinning.

Hager pulled out the metal device he'd bought from the gnome and twisted a few gears. It clicked, ticked, and the tiny dial rotated in a slow, complicated spin.

"Right," he announced. "Says it's the fourth day of the fifth moon."

He squinted at the sky. "Not that it means a damned thing."

Then he laughed. "What's the use of *knowing* it's the fourth of the fifth? My stomach says it's the end of ale o'clock."

"You wasted your coin," Mithri said, hopping onto a rock. "That gnome spun a pretty tale. And you fell for it."

"He talked fast," Hager grumbled. "It confused my purse."

Their laughter died as the smell hit them.

Char. Ash. Something deeper—burned thatch, smoke-baked earth, and the sickening sweet tinge of old death.

They crested a low hill and saw it.

A village—or what had once been one.

The buildings were nothing but blackened bones, smoldering heaps of collapsed timber and cracked stone. The air was still hot in places, and the wind kicked ash into swirling spirals. Burned wagons lined the dirt path, and shattered pottery lay among the ruins.

But it wasn't the destruction alone that drew the party to a halt.

It was the symbols.

Scorched into the wooden walls, carved into doors, even painted in ash on stone—spirals of flame enclosed by sharp angular lines.

The mark of the Ashen Flame.

Eloanil's breath caught in her throat. "They came through here. Not long ago."

Burmir knelt beside one of the symbols, running a gloved hand over the blackened wood. "This wasn't a raid. This was a *message*."

Mithri turned slowly, bow in hand, eyes scanning the ruins. "And we're walking straight into their wake."

Hager exhaled through his nose, pipe clamped between his teeth.

"Then we'd best walk with weapons ready."

And onward they went, into the ashes of the fallen.

They moved carefully through the ruined village, weapons drawn, every sense sharpened to the snapping of old timber, the hiss of cinders still buried under collapsed walls. Ash crunched underfoot. The smell of death lingered, stale and bitter.

Burmir walked point, spear leveled. Eloanil and Mithri flanked him, bows drawn, while Hager brought up the rear, axe ready and pipe clenched stubbornly between his teeth.

The village felt wrong. Not just ruined—but *watchful*.

Then, it shifted.

Out of the blackened heaps, the ashes stirred and lifted, twisting into shapes that should not exist. Figures rose—eight in total—masses of ash and soot molded into humanoid forms. Their bodies were ragged, with hollow chests and arms that dripped smoky tendrils. Their faces were voids, where eyes should be, only thin slits of glowing ember.

They moved like wind through flame—silent at first.

Until they shrieked.

A sound like burning paper ripped the air.

"*Form up!*" Burmir barked, spear snapping to guard.

The ash-creatures rushed them.

The first one lunged for Burmir. He stabbed forward, the spear tearing through its torso—but the thing reformed, the ash writhing around the wound. It slammed a smoky fist into his chest, knocking him back into a crumbling wall.

Hager met two at once, swinging wide with his axe, the blade parting their forms—but not fully dispersing them. One lashed an ember whip across his side, burning through leather and into flesh.

"*Flaming mothers of orc shit!*" Hager cursed, backhanding the creature with the haft of his axe.

Mithri ducked a sweeping strike and drove an arrow point-blank into one's smoky gut. It stumbled, losing cohesion, but not falling.

Eloanil tried a blast of divine light—one creature recoiled, shrieking, parts of its form vaporizing under the holy power. But three more surged toward her.

Burmir scrambled back to his feet, jabbing one creature through the head. "*They don't die easy!*" he shouted. "*Aim for the glow!*"

Mithri fired again, striking one in its ember heart. It burst apart, scattering into a rain of blackened dust.

"One down!" she called.

Eloanil took a heavy blow from another, thrown to the ground with a sharp cry. Hager roared and barreled into her attacker, slamming it into the burnt remains of a house beam. The ash creature struggled, but Hager's axe pinned it there, and Eloanil gasped out a prayer, searing it with radiant fire.

Two more ash creatures swarmed Burmir, driving him back step by step. He cursed under his breath.

"Would you bastards just stay *dead*?!"

He spun his spear in a wide arc, scattering one long enough for Mithri to land an arrow clean through its core. It exploded in a shriek of sparks.

The last three closed in hard—clawing, hissing, gnashing with ember jaws. Eloanil, bleeding from her arm, raised her hand and unleashed a wide blast of divine light. Hager charged the stunned figures, axe flashing, while Burmir drove his spear through the last, his body shaking with exhaustion.

Finally, it was over.

The blackened village fell still once more, only the soft hiss of settling ash around them.

They gathered themselves, breathing hard, bruised and bleeding. Burmir had a scorched gash along his ribs, Hager's arm was raw from the ember whip, and Eloanil limped from a twisted ankle.

Eloanil knelt, whispering a healing prayer. Warm light knit some wounds closed, easing the worst of the burns. Mithri pulled a healing potion from her belt—cracked in the fight, but still intact—and they passed it around, each taking a long gulp before handing it to the next.

As they caught their breath, a figure approached from the ruined street.

A human man, wrapped in a tattered green cloak, bow slung across his back and a jagged scar running down his cheek. His boots were ash-caked, his armor battered. But his eyes were sharp and alive.

"Name's Halven," he said, lowering his hood. "Been watchin' you from the hills. Didn't think anyone but flame cultists would be mad enough to walk into this pit."

Burmir narrowed his eyes. "You another hunter?"

Halven shook his head. "Rebel. We've got a camp hidden in the ravines. Could use more hands that can survive a brush with the Ashen Flame."

He nodded toward the road beyond the ruins.

"Come. Before the next thing crawls out of the ashes."

The party exchanged looks.

Tired, bloodied, but breathing, they followed him.

Halven led them away from the smoldering village, guiding the party through winding ravines and tight canyons until they reached a hidden hollow deep within the stone embrace of the Trollclaws. It was well concealed—only a narrow rock passage marked the way in, barely wide enough for two abreast. Once inside, the ravine opened into a natural bowl, surrounded on all sides by towering stone.

The rebel camp was crude but clever. Tents and lean-tos were built from scavenged canvas and tree limbs, while fire pits were tucked into stone niches to conceal their smoke. Crates, barrels, and bundles of salvaged goods were stacked along the walls, protected under tarps. A few rough forges had been cobbled together from brick, with makeshift anvils resting on flat stones.

People moved with purpose—humans, elves, a few halflings, even two half-orcs, all hardened by loss and the will to fight. Many were wounded, their armor in pieces, their faces smudged with dirt and ash, but their eyes were alert, watchful.

A fire near the center crackled with fresh meat roasting over it. Halven waved the party toward it. "Sit. Eat. You've earned it."

They were given thick cuts of roasted deer, seasoned with wild herbs and served on wooden planks, along with dark, smoky ale poured from a clay jug. The food was rough, but rich and filling.

Burmir tore into the meat with a grunt of approval. “Better than half the taverns I’ve been to.”

Hager wiped grease from his mouth with his forearm. “And no gnome trying to sell me clocks.”

Near the fire sat a wounded dwarf, his leg wrapped tight with bandages, one eye swollen shut. His beard was scorched at the ends, but his voice was still strong.

“Name’s Torgrun,” he said, nodding to the party. “From the Stonefire Holds… what’s left of them.”

Burmir looked over sharply. “Stonefire? Thought those halls were sealed.”

“They were,” Torgrun said. “But not well enough. The Ashen Flame found the tunnels beneath. They’re diggin’, lookin’ for somethin’—and it ain’t iron.”

“What’s under there?” Mithri asked.

Torgrun leaned forward. “An outpost. Old dwarven. From the First Age, maybe. Buried beneath the Fields of the Dead. They called it Khund Varn. Not a mine. A vault. Might’ve held something the Flame wants.”

“Another cursed sword?” Hager muttered, rubbing his ribs.

“Or worse,” Eloanil added, eyes narrowing.

Torgrun spat into the fire. “Whatever it is, they can’t be allowed to dig it up.”

A few hours later, they were asked to help sort through a pile of scavenged metal—weapons, scrap, armor pieces—anything that could be reforged. The smith, a wiry elf named Saelen, barked instructions as they worked.

“Sort by grade—iron to the left, steel to the middle, broken blades over there. If it’s got runes, don’t toss it. Might be enchanted.”

They set to work. Mithri and Hager handled the heavier pieces, tossing rusted helms and bent blades onto the appropriate piles. Burmir took an interest in a half-melted axe head etched with dwarven script, while Eloanil sorted arrowheads and broken buckles with quiet precision.

As they worked, a rebel scout sat nearby sharpening a dagger.

“Been patrolling the southern ridges,” he said. “Something’s stirring out there.”

“More goblins?” Burmir asked.

“Worse. Heard guttural chants last night. Saw fires on the hills. Could’ve been cultists. Or those bone-covered things—they’ve got shamblers now. Dead that walk but don’t rot.”

Eloanil looked up sharply. “The Ashen Flame again?”

“Probably. They don’t sleep, and they don’t leave much.”

Mithri slid a curved blade onto the steel pile. “You people stay here with that creeping around?”

“Nowhere else to go,” the scout replied. “And someone’s got to keep the fire from spreading.”

They worked until the sun began to fall behind the cliffs. The clang of steel echoed through the camp, a rough rhythm of survival and resistance. The rebels weren’t many, but they were fierce—and growing.

And now the party had a new path.

To the Fields of the Dead. To Khund Varn.

To whatever waited beneath the earth, buried in time and shadow.

The wind cut sharp across the ridgelines of the Trollclaws as the party left the rebel camp behind. Their packs were heavier with gear, their thoughts heavier still with what lay ahead. They crossed a winding path eastward, leading them toward the low stone sprawl of Trollclaw Ford, where dark water crept between broken rocks and the air smelled faintly of old moss and dried blood.

They passed across the shallow ford by stepping-stones worn smooth by centuries. The silence of the place was broken only by their boots splashing through the dark stream and the occasional growl of distant thunder beyond the hills.

It was mid-afternoon when they were attacked.

The wind dropped suddenly, and the stench came first—thick rot, like graveyards turned inside out. Then came the snarls, and the sound of heavy limbs dragging through wet earth.

Three rot trolls emerged from behind a jagged ridge, their flesh half-rotted and trailing black sludge, their eyes pale green with hunger. Long claws dripped with slime, and their jaws gaped unnaturally wide, split down the cheeks as if torn by their own screams.

“*Trolls!*” Mithri shouted, already drawing her bow.

The first troll lunged at Hager, who stood firm and met it head-on, his axe crashing into its shoulder with a wet crunch. The creature screamed, swiping with a long, festering claw, carving open Hager’s sleeve and drawing blood. “*Rotting bastard!*” he roared, slamming the axe handle into the troll’s chin.

Burmir charged the second, spear lowered, ramming it through the troll's bloated stomach. The creature let out a gurgling howl and vomited black bile onto Burmir's chest. "*Sweet mother of fungus!*" he cried, wrenching the spear free and spitting into the dirt.

The third troll made for Eloanil and Mithri, swinging its massive arm like a club. Mithri leapt aside, but her ankle twisted on a loose stone and she hit the ground hard with a cry. Eloanil stood her ground, summoning radiant energy that blasted into the troll's chest, slowing its advance. "*Back to the muck, filthspawn!*"

Hager finished his with a brutal swing of his axe, cleaving through the skull in a spray of black rot. The troll collapsed, twitching. Burmir circled behind the second and drove his spear through its spine, pinning it to a boulder. Mithri, still on one knee, fired an arrow clean through its throat.

The last troll reared up for a final charge, but Eloanil unleashed a pulse of searing moonlight that cracked through its ribcage like fire through glass. It fell, limbs twitching, then stilled.

Silence again.

They stood panting, weapons slick, flesh scraped and sore. Mithri groaned, clutching her ankle as she leaned against a stone.

"It's not broken," she muttered through clenched teeth.

"Still," Eloanil said gently, kneeling beside her. She placed her hands on the injury and whispered a soft incantation. A glow of pale silver pulsed beneath her palms. "This will ease the pain."

Burmir wiped rot from his chest with a look of disgust. "That's the worst smell I've ever worn."

"Speak for yourself," Hager grunted.

Then he slipped on a patch of loose stone and fell headfirst down a small edge, landing with a solid *thud* into the gravel below. Blood burst from his nose, and he cursed in full voice.

"*By the broken teeth of Durin's arse, I hate this cursed ground!*"

"Careful, Hager," Mithri said, limping forward. "It bites back."

They pressed on through the jagged terrain, picking their way around sun-scorched cliffs and bone-dry ravines. The days bled together, the ground never soft, the air never kind.

And then, at last, they saw it.

The Fields of the Dead.

Stretching wide across the horizon, a vast plain of yellowed grass, broken weapons, and scattered stone markers. Crumbling helms and shattered banners lay where time had left

them. The sky hung low, tinged with grey, and the air grew cold—not with weather, but with presence.

And then the whispers came.

Low at first, like the rustle of leaves. Then voices, many, soft and sorrowful. Ghosts.

Figures began to shimmer in the distance—half-seen warriors wandering the old battlefield. Pale knights limping on shattered legs, spectral banners drifting through the air without hands to carry them.

"*They watch us,*" Eloanil whispered, voice hollow.

"Let them watch," Burmir said, gripping his spear. "We're not the ones who stayed behind."

But even he looked over his shoulder now and then, as they walked deeper into the land of the forgotten dead.

Fields of the Dead

The Fields of the Dead stretched around them like a memory carved into the earth. Every step stirred ash and dust. Shattered armor littered the hillsides—helmets split down the crown, rusted swords buried hilt-deep in soil, bones half-buried beneath dry grass. It felt as though war still breathed here, just beneath the surface, waiting to rise again.

They followed Torgrun's crude map, winding past an ancient cairn of crumbled stone and a line of blackened spears driven into the ground like the ribs of a long-dead beast. And there, half-buried in a rise of rock and thistle, they found it.

A carved stone door—runed, cracked, yet still sealed. Moss grew between the old dwarvish glyphs, but the mark of Khund Varn remained: a hammer split in two, encircled by a ring of mountain peaks.

Burmir placed his hand on the stone. "This is old. First Age, maybe older. My grandmother told tales of vaults like this."

Mithri checked her bowstring, eyes narrow. "Anything buried this deep was meant to *stay* buried."

Hager stepped forward, axe in hand. "Then let's find out what it's hiding."

Eloanil whispered a short blessing, and the door creaked open, grinding along stone tracks unseen beneath the dust.

The air inside was thick with centuries. Cold and dry, it smelled of metal and old magic. Narrow corridors opened into chambers where stone forges stood still, their fires long dead. Yet the silence was heavy, oppressive—as if the walls themselves were waiting.

And then they heard it.

A low clanking of chainmail. The faint tap of boots on stone.

From a side passage emerged the first—an armored dwarf, its body desiccated, beard grey with cobwebs, eyes hollow and burning with pale blue light. Then came another. And another. Five in all, clad in ancient bronze, etched with clan markings that time had nearly erased.

Their mouths opened not in greeting—but in a war cry that echoed from a time long gone.

Burmir raised his spear. “They still guard it!”

The undead dwarves charged.

The first struck Hager with a shield bash that sent him reeling. Hager caught himself and swung low, his axe biting into the undead dwarf’s leg—but it did not fall.

Mithri fired from the rear, arrow after arrow sinking into brittle armor. One undead collapsed, arrow through its skull.

Eloanil called upon the light of Sehanine, her hand flaring with radiant energy that exploded into the corridor. The undead recoiled, one vaporized where it stood.

Burmir fought two at once, parrying with the haft of his spear, driving it into one’s gut and twisting it free. “I’ll not be bested by the bones of my kin!”

Another dwarf leapt at Mithri, swinging a rusted hammer. She dodged, but the head grazed her arm, bruising flesh. She gritted her teeth and stabbed upward, dagger slipping beneath the helmet and into the skull.

Hager, bleeding from the forehead, buried his axe in the last one’s chest, then shoved it against the wall, crushing its skull with a stone slab.

Silence fell again.

The bodies twitched, then stilled, collapsing into fragments of bone and bronze.

“They weren’t angry,” Eloanil said softly, kneeling beside one. “They were doing what they were made to do. Protect.”

Burmir wiped blood from his beard. “Then let’s find what they were protecting.”

The vault still ran deep. And somewhere below, its secrets still waited.

The silence that followed the battle was deeper than before—hushed, reverent, as if even the tomb itself mourned the final fall of its ancient guardians. The party stood among the broken remains of long-dead dwarves who had defended their charge across centuries without falter.

Burmir knelt beside the last fallen sentinel, brushing away shattered bronze and bone. “They weren’t just warriors. These were stonebound—oath-sworn protectors. This place mattered.”

Eloanil held her hand aloft, casting soft silver light down the dark corridor ahead. “And whatever they guarded, it’s close.”

They pressed deeper into the vault, the halls growing narrower, more intimate, with carved dwarven script along the walls—words of oath, clan, sacrifice. Dust and time had softened the edges, but their meaning lingered. They reached a chamber whose ceiling had partly collapsed, letting in a sliver of cold daylight through a crack above. Beneath that faint shaft of light stood a stone pedestal, untouched by ruin.

Upon it sat two objects.

The first: a torn, weathered scrap of parchment, pinned beneath a heavy iron dagger. As Burmir carefully lifted it, he saw the unmistakable runes of an old dwarven chart—another piece of the ancient map, ink faded but intact. He slowly unfolded it, lining it up with the earlier fragment they'd received from Caerivon.

“*Another piece,*” he said, voice low. “Looks like it points eastward—mountain country. The Lost Peaks maybe.”

“And this?” Eloanil asked, nodding toward the second item.

It was a rough-hewn black stone, palm-sized and veined with streaks of silvery quartz. Etched into its surface were angular runes that pulsed faintly with a warm amber glow. As Burmir touched it, the runes flared brighter, and a distant voice spoke—not aloud, but in the heart:

“Oath accepted. Clan-blood speaks. Bound to honor. Bound to remember.”

Burmir’s breath caught in his throat.

“A dwarven oath-stone,” he said, awed. “They used these in ancient days to seal promises—family oaths, battle pacts, and the protection of sacred ground. This one’s still active.”

Hager peered over his shoulder. “Does it *do* anything?”

Burmir nodded slowly. “It binds. If you swear upon it, it holds you to your word. And if you break it…”

“It remembers,” Eloanil finished, her voice quiet.

They stood in silence for a moment, the map piece carefully packed, the oath-stone held close.

Whatever lay ahead—mountain, ruin, or war—they now carried not just a path, but a promise.

And the oath was awake.

The chamber had gone still again, save for the soft creaking of old stone and the fading scent of rusted battle. The party settled on worn slabs of carved rock, backs resting against columns and broken walls. For a rare moment, the ground was solid, the shadows calm.

Burmir and Hager sat side by side, smoke curling from their pipes in soft spirals.

Burmir rolled the oath-stone slowly in his calloused hands, its weight somehow heavier than it looked. He stared into its glowing runes, lips moving in a low chant as he spoke the old tongue of his kin.

"*Dur falg haz'dun...*" he muttered.

Hager looked over, puffing on his crooked pipe. "That your idea of a lullaby?"

Burmir shook his head, eyes distant. "Old words. Very old. *Stone knows what stone remembers.* That's what my da used to say."

He whispered again:

"*Kazrak dohn thurak. Brevun khar-ûl. Nar'dhur… Duregar.*"

The stone pulsed in his hand, once—twice—and then the light within brightened, and it spoke, not aloud, but deep in the marrow of the room.

"Duregar. King of Underblight. Oath-breaker. Exile. The Stonebound King."

The air chilled slightly. Eloanil and Mithri looked over from their quiet conversation.

Burmir sat up straighter, still holding the stone gently as if it might shatter with the wrong breath.

The voice—ancient, layered like chisel-strikes against cavern walls—continued.

“Duregar, son of Durgan, once ruled the deeps of Underblight, a city of silver-veined halls and forges that burned brighter than day. His people were strong, proud. His oaths were many.”

“But Duregar grew bitter. When the mountain trembled and the ceiling cracked, he sought aid from the surface. The elves refused. The humans bartered. The dwarves of the Iron Mountains turned their backs.”

“So Duregar struck a bargain.”

The stone pulsed again.

“The Ashen Flame came to him, cloaked in promises. They offered strength, magic, protection. In return, he swore an oath not to the gods, but to fire.”

Mithri leaned forward, frowning. “He bound his people to the cult?”

“He did,” the stone answered. “And in doing so, he cursed Underblight. The forges burned too hot. The stone wept. The gold turned black. The dead did not rest.”

Burmir’s hand trembled.

“His kin turned on him. His blood was spilled in the throne chamber. Yet still… the oath held. And the flame remembers.”

The light faded slowly from the stone. The chamber dimmed, and silence returned—thick, thoughtful.

“So,” Hager said after a long pause, tapping the ash from his pipe, “our cheerful little relic links us to a king who sold out his people to cultists and got stabbed for it.”

“Not just that,” Burmir murmured, staring into the stone. “He broke an oath… and this stone was bound to it. We’re carryin’ the weight of that promise now.”

Eloanil looked toward the exit of the chamber, where darkness waited.

“Let’s just hope it doesn’t come to collect.”

And the oath-stone glowed faintly again, as if it heard her.

The ancient stones of Khund Varn faded behind them like a dream now spoken aloud—its weight clung to their packs, its oath-stone resting heavily against Burmir’s chest. The wind over the Fields of the Dead was colder now, as if even the ghosts respected their departure.

They set course east, toward the Chionthar River, a glittering blue serpent that wound through the broken lands and marked the next step in their journey toward Candlekeep.

For days they walked through hills yellowed by sun, ravines shadowed with bramble, and fields still littered with rusted helmets and the odd spear-tip buried in the soil. They passed a shattered shrine at one point, a once-standing monument to some god now long forgotten, its face eroded smooth by time.

Near midday on the fourth day, they spotted another group approaching from the west. A traveling party—three figures moving casually along the broken road.

Two were human: the first, a tall man with a scar running from chin to ear, his eyes dark and slow-moving, armor pieced together from mismatched brigandine and leathers; the second, a wiry woman with a crooked grin and several knives strapped across her chest, wearing a thick green scarf despite the warmth. The third was a squat, red-bearded dwarf with a dented helm and an axe that had seen far too much use and far too little care.

The two groups met at a bend in the road where a worn milestone lay half-buried in the grass.

Burmir gave a courteous nod. “You three coming from the river?”

The scarred man nodded. “Aye. You heading that way?”

“That’s the plan. Looking to cross.”

“Best bet’s west. Small town called Elturel sits by a bend in the Chionthar. There’s a ferry crossing. Sometimes guarded, sometimes not.”

The woman smiled thinly. “Folk there don’t ask many questions if you’ve got coin.”

“Appreciated,” Eloanil said. “Safe travels.”

They parted ways.

Hours passed, and the sun sank lower. At a bubbling stream, the party stopped to refill waterskins and wash the road’s dust from their faces. Burmir and Hager lit their pipes, the smoke rising gently between them.

Then Mithri froze.

She was crouched by the stream when she spotted movement behind a nearby thicket—shadows where no wind moved. She rose, hand drifting to her bow.

“They’re following us,” she said under her breath. “The three from the road.”

Hager didn’t hesitate.

His voice boomed, deep and commanding: “*Come out, you sneakers! I don’t like grass that walks!*”

The brush shifted, and the three stepped out.

No longer friendly. No more polite smiles.

The scarred man rested his hand on his blade. “You’re carrying something valuable. Gold, gear, relics. We’ll be taking it now.”

Burmir stood slowly, pipe clenched between his teeth. “You really want to do this?”

“We gave you directions. Consider this the toll,” the woman said, knives gleaming.

The dwarf spat. “Drop the packs, and we’ll leave you in one piece.”

Mithri was already stringing her bow. “I *hate* being followed.”

Then the blades came out.

The scarred man charged Burmir, sword flashing. Burmir barely parried the first swing, but the second sliced a deep gouge across his upper arm. He countered with a heavy thrust of his spear, landing a solid blow to the man’s thigh.

Eloanil called radiant fire from her palm and hurled it at the dwarf, who raised his axe just in time—he was scorched but not stopped. He barreled into Hager with a war cry, and the two clashed with brutal force. Hager’s axe rang against the dwarf’s helm, and the dwarf countered with a shield bash that sent Hager staggering backward into a tree.

The knife-woman lunged at Mithri, two blades flashing in tight circles. Mithri dodged the first, caught the second across her forearm, then rolled under the third and fired an arrow into the woman’s side at point-blank range. The woman screamed and stumbled back, blood soaking her scarf.

"*Drop your damn knife, witch!*" the scarred man shouted, pressing hard against Burmir.

"Drop *yours*, bastard!" Burmir growled, and with a roar, shoulder-checked him into a tree and drove his spear through the man's gut.

Hager, now bleeding from the nose, slammed his axe into the dwarf's leg and followed with a kick to the chest. The dwarf crumpled, unconscious or dead—it didn't matter.

Mithri and the woman circled once more, but Mithri was faster. One last arrow caught the woman in the throat, and she dropped without a word.

Silence.

Again.

The party staggered, panting, bloodied. Burmir sat hard on a stone and tore his sleeve to bind his arm.

"Damn road tolls," he muttered.

Eloanil raised her hands and whispered a healing prayer. Warm light spread through their wounds, sealing the worst of them. Mithri passed around a healing potion, sharing careful sips between them.

"We're getting too used to this," Hager grunted, wiping blood from his beard.

"They underestimated us," Eloanil said softly. "They won't be the last."

The Chionthar waited.

And they marched on, bruised—but burning with purpose.

The bodies of the would-be robbers lay still in the grass, their blood soaking into the earth beside the quiet stream. Hager walked up to the scarred man's corpse, looked down for a moment, then grunted.

He lifted his boot and kicked the man square in the face.

"*These moles didn't think through their robbery too carefully,*" he said, spitting into the dirt beside the body.

"Guess road tolls come with interest," Burmir muttered, wiping his spear clean.

The party gathered their gear, checked their wounds one last time, and pressed on toward the Chionthar. The land grew greener as they descended into the river valley, fields peppered with wildflowers and grazing deer. Birds wheeled overhead, and the river's glint was visible between the folds of the land like a ribbon of steel.

By midday, they crested a rise—and there it was.

Chionthar Crossing

Elturel.

But not as they had hoped.

The town, once quiet and half-ringed by wooden palisades and stone buildings, stood under siege. Black smoke curled from several rooftops inside the walls. Flags bearing a crude symbol—a flaming serpent wrapped around a cross—fluttered above makeshift battering rams and crude siege towers built from tree trunks and iron scraps.

Tents littered the hillside around the western side of the town. Maybe thirty soldiers, give or take, were moving among the siege camp—most armored in rough steel, some with fire-touched robes, their tabards scorched and darkened. These were cultists, unmistakably part of the **Ashen Flame**. Most looked poorly disciplined, but well-armed and dangerous in numbers.

To the north of the town, half-hidden in the high reeds and shallow ridges, another group waited—this one unaligned, unbothered by the siege yet clearly prepared for battle. About fifteen strong, these warriors bore no standard but were armored in mismatched plate and mail, leather and boiled hide. Veterans, by the look of them.

Burmir signaled for the party to crouch low.

They crept forward, carefully picking their way through the weeds and loose rocks until they reached the outer edge of the warband's loose circle.

"Ho there," Mithri said, bow in hand but not drawn. "You lot waiting for the end of the world, or just the next opening?"

A grizzled woman turned, scar down her jaw and a longsword strapped across her back. She eyed them warily. "Travelers? Or scouts?"

"We're looking to cross the river," Eloanil said. "But that looks off the table."

"The rafts are sunk," a young man added bitterly. "Last one was torched three nights ago."

The group of warriors—five women, nine men, and one half-elf wearing a chain shirt too fine for a mercenary—stood around fireless pits and overturned carts. They were survivors of some militia, maybe locals from the outer farms. What they lacked was a leader. A few argued among themselves—whether to attack, retreat, wait, or bargain. It was clear they had no direction.

Burmir stepped forward.

"You want to end that siege? You'll need to strike from both sides."

"And who leads it? You?" the scarred woman asked.

“Do you see anyone else stepping up?”

After some grumbling and half-hearted resistance, the party took charge.

They laid out a plan—Mithri and one of the younger warriors, a lean scout named **Rollen**, would slip past the outer lines and sneak into Elturel under cover of dusk, finding the city guard or anyone left who could still wield a blade. Their job: time an attack from within to coincide with the outer assault.

By late afternoon, Rollen had vanished into the high grass and broken orchard groves. The sun dipped lower, red through the haze of smoke.

He returned just before nightfall, breathless but grinning. “They’re ready. Small force inside —twenty, maybe—but armed and angry. They’ll open the north gate at dusk. Once the fire’s lit on the barn roof, we move.”

The party and the warriors crouched among the rocks and brush, watching the cultists move lazily between their siege gear, unaware of what was coming.

The land around the city dipped into small gullies and ridges, thick with weeds and tall grass. West of the walls, the Chionthar glimmered wide and dark, its surface smooth under the dusk sky. The siege camp sprawled across the south wall—makeshift barricades, tents with oilskin tops, one central fire pit around which most of the cultists gathered.

The cultists wore scorched cloaks and blackened armor. A few bore tattoos of flame symbols on their throats or forearms. Their leader—a man in tattered crimson robes with a charred staff—paced often, speaking to no one, his eyes always scanning the walls.

Soon, the barn roof would burn.

And the river would run open again—or run red.

The wind shifted just after sunset, carrying the scent of burning straw. A flicker of flame appeared on the northern edge of the town—first small, then roaring—the signal.

The barn roof was ablaze.

“Time,” Burmir growled, pulling his helmet tight. “Let’s remind them what it means to siege the wrong place.”

The warriors moved like wolves through the high grass, the party at their head. No horns, no drums—only the thudding of boots and the low whisper of steel being drawn. The Ashen Flame cultists had grown lazy, confident in their numbers and the disarray of the town. They would pay for that now.

The attack struck from the north and south at once, Elturel’s gate opening in a groan of rusted hinges, and the town guard poured out like a wave of flame-hardened steel, striking the rear of the siege camp. Inside the camp, chaos erupted.

The cultists scrambled, shouting, blades half-drawn, their leader turning in panic as the pincer closed. From the southern ridge, Burmir’s spear struck the first of them down—a hooded soldier with eyes like coals and a blade still in its sheath. The warriors behind him surged forward, cutting into the disorganized defenders with brutal efficiency.

Hager roared as he met a pair of axe-wielding fanatics, swinging wide and knocking both to the ground in a spray of dirt and blood. “*Back to the ash with you!*”

Mithri darted through the madness, loosing arrows into exposed gaps in cultist armor—one to the throat, one to the eye. “Keep moving!” she yelled, ducking behind a wagon wheel as flames from the barn reflected in her eyes.

Eloanil was not in the front lines—she stood among the townspeople who had gathered outside the gate, shielding the wounded and the frightened. Her hands lifted, silver light dancing between her fingers.

“Sehanine, shield them,” she whispered.

Her voice echoed oddly—more than her own.

As the cultists turned and began to flank, she raised her arms and a burst of radiant light flared around the townsfolk, a dome of shimmering moonlight that halted a wave of oncoming blades. The cultists shrieked as the light seared them—not fire, but memory. Their skin blistered, their minds shattered.

Around Eloanil, faint figures began to shimmer—elven warriors in translucent armor, bowstrings drawn, eyes like stars. They did not speak, but their presence was felt in the bones. The townspeople stared in awe.

Burmir saw her glowing figure through the dust of battle and muttered, “Either we’ve died and gone to elf heaven, or she’s been holding out on us.”

The cultist leader—a man with charred robes and a black staff—tried to rally, shouting some foul invocation to flame. He lifted his staff to the sky—but it shattered in his hand, struck by one of Mithri’s arrows.

Then Hager brought him down with a charging blow that split helm and skull alike.

Within minutes, the cultists were routed.

Some fled into the trees. Some fell screaming. Others surrendered, blades clattering to the ground.

The warriors of Elturel and the allied militia cheered.

The town was saved.

Eloanil lowered her hands, and the dome of moonlight faded. The spectral elves turned, bowed their heads once, and drifted away like mist caught in starlight.

She stood still, her eyes closed, face pale.

“You alright?” Mithri asked, stepping close.

“I... wasn’t alone,” Eloanil whispered. “They were watching. Helping.”

“Who?” Burmir asked, wiping blood from his cheek.

She looked at him, and her voice came quiet, certain.

“My ancestors.”

The battle was won—but something greater had awakened. Not just in steel and fire, but in the old blood that remembered.

The town of Elturel still bore the bruises of siege—burnt walls, shattered doors, blackened rooftops—but within its heart, the spirit of the people burned bright. As the sun fell and the smoke from the battlefield drifted eastward, the light of torches and hearths filled the narrow streets with warmth.

The Murky Hog stood at the center of it all—a squat timber building with a sagging sign depicting a muddy pig waddling through a puddle. The scent of smoke, spilled ale, and unwashed villagers wafted from the open windows like a familiar farmstead curse.

Inside, the tavern roared with life.

Locals crammed into the wooden hall, most in patched tunics and threadbare cloaks, faces smeared with soot and celebration. Mud-caked boots pounded the floor as someone strummed a battered lute in the corner, plucking a merry rhythm that turned to laughter and

dancing. Clay mugs thudded on tables, sloshing dark ale over rough-hewn boards. More than one man smelled suspiciously like the pigpen outside, and no one seemed to care.

Burmir pushed the tavern door open with a grin. “Aye, smells like victory in here.”

“Smells like victory mated with manure,” Hager replied, waving a hand in front of his face.

They found a table near the hearth and soon enough had mugs of ale in hand and steaming bowls of vegetables and pork stew clutched eagerly before them.

“Food actually has flavor,” Mithri said between bites. “Could be the first time this month.”

“It’s got pig in it,” Hager said proudly. “That’s all I need to know.”

A burly farmer in a torn tunic stumbled over with a mug in each hand. “You lot the ones that helped kick the Flame out?”

“That we are,” Burmir said, puffing his pipe.

“Well by gods, drink with us then!” the man laughed, slamming the mugs onto their table and sloshing half the ale onto Burmir’s boots.

Another villager—an older woman with no teeth and more beard than the dwarf beside her—slammed down beside them. “To *real warriors*! Not like them coward goats what ran before the flames came!”

“I’ll drink to that,” Mithri said, raising her mug.

Ale flowed. Voices grew louder. A man tried to stand on a table to dance and fell straight through it, to the amusement of half the room. Somewhere in the crowd, a small dog began howling in time with the lute, and a toothless girl twirled like she’d been born with music in her bones.

“I haven’t felt this alive in years,” Eloanil said softly, her eyes warm as she watched the dancing.

“You didn’t glow in the last fight,” Burmir muttered with a wink. “You *blazed*. What was that?”

“I don’t know,” she answered. “But they were there. My kin. Old ones. Watching. Maybe guiding.”

“I saw ‘em,” Hager said, taking another swig. “Even with one eye half-covered in blood. That weren’t any battlefield trick.”

A band of battered warriors entered the tavern, still in armor, still bloodied, but carrying wide grins and the swagger of survival. They found the party and joined them, clapping backs and raising mugs. Stories began to flow.

“That fire priest nearly took my damn ear off!” one shouted.

“And you dropped your sword trying to chase a chicken,” another laughed.

“Still killed two of them before I picked it up!”

The night stretched on, filled with laughter, drunken toasts, and the thud of boots as someone else began pounding on the tables to the rhythm of the lute. Villagers danced again, pigs squealed from the pen out back, and even the barmaid wore a grin as wide as a river.

Just past midnight, as the tavern reached its haze-thick peak, a lean, red-faced man in damp wool entered and raised his voice over the din.

“Raft’ll be ready come dawn!” he called. “Logs’re bein’ lashed now—she’ll float with morning tide!”

A cheer went up, and mugs were lifted once again.

The road ahead would call them soon—but for tonight, they were safe. Full. Celebrated. Remembered.

And drunk. Very, very drunk.

The first light of dawn broke golden over the Chionthar River, mist curling like breath from the water’s surface. On the near bank, the villagers of Elturel were already stirring. At the small raft dock, the ferryman—a sun-leathered man with a permanent squint and a half-chewed root between his teeth—was overseeing the loading of barrels, sacks, and crates onto the broad flat raft. A mule snorted nearby, waiting to haul the next cart down the slope.

Other travelers gathered along the muddy edge, paying their way with coin and quiet gratitude that the siege was done.

The party arrived, cloaks draped over shoulders, boots still caked in old blood and road dust. The ferryman eyed them and gave a nod.

“Raft’s takin’ all comers. One silver each, no questions.”

Burmir flipped him a coin. “We like that kind of policy.”

They climbed aboard, steadying themselves among the goods and people. The raft creaked under the shifting weight as the ferryman shoved them off and they glided into the current.

The journey across was short but peaceful—the wide, steady river parting around the raft like a lazy serpent. Eloanil stared downstream toward the glittering horizon. “Two weeks to Candlekeep,” she murmured.

“If we’re lucky,” Hager replied. “Or not eaten.”

After disembarking on the far side, they followed the trade road south until a wagon passed by—a broad wooden cart hitched to two shaggy donkeys, driven by a squat man with a round red face and a beard that smelled faintly of old mead.

He pulled the reins. “Room on the back if you ain’t heavy. Headin’ southeast. Half a week’s ride, maybe more.”

Burmir hopped onto the back without waiting. “You had me at ‘not walking.’”

They climbed in, settling among crates of dried fruit, spices, bolts of wool, and a cage holding three geese who hissed every time Mithri looked at them.

The road unspooled behind them, a long ribbon of golden grasslands and low hills.

“So,” the trader asked as the wheels bumped along, “you all bounty hunters? Priests? Or just a pack of road-stinking glory seekers?”

“We’re on a pilgrimage,” Hager said solemnly.

“To punch evil in the face,” Burmir added.

Eloanil gave a faint smile. “We walk where the road turns dark.”

“And eat where it doesn’t bite back,” Mithri said, pointing at one of the hissing geese.

The trader laughed. “Well, I’ve hauled worse. Had a necromancer once. Paid in bones. Literally.”

They shared food on the road—dried meat, soft bread, and wine from a skin that Burmir had forgotten he had. When the trader belched so hard the geese went silent, Hager declared him an honorary dwarf for the day.

After several days, they reached a dusty trade outpost—little more than a stony yard with a few thatched stalls and a cracked fountain. The trader pulled up the reins.

“End of my trail. Candlekeep’s yonder.” He pointed southward, where the grasslands dipped into low valleys.

Eloanil flipped him three silver pieces and a grateful nod. “For the ride—and the geese.”

He snorted. “You want ‘em, take ‘em.”

“No.”

They set off again on foot, boots crunching over packed dirt and narrow stone. The footpath wound through open plains where wildflowers grew in patches and cicadas chirped under the sun.

That’s when the hairs on Mithri’s neck rose.

“Stop,” she hissed, raising a hand. “Something’s wrong.”

From the brambles to their right, a *ripping* sound like silk tearing—and two shapes emerged.

At first glance, they appeared human, dressed in torn traveling cloaks and cloaked hoods. But as they stepped into view, their forms shifted—arms elongating, legs bending backward, and skin splitting with a sickening, wet sound. Their bodies morphed grotesquely: human faces became twisted maws with mandibles and black spidery eyes. From their backs sprouted jointed legs, arcing over their hunched forms. One's mouth gushed thick drool between its fangs.

Werespiders.

"By the Nine—" Burmir managed, before one lunged.

The first leapt at Eloanil, limbs clicking as it landed, fangs stabbing at her chest. She fell back, conjuring a burst of moonlight that sent it skittering off her with a hiss.

The second charged Hager, catching him with a claw that tore through his cloak and across his shoulder.

"I *hate* spiders," he growled, swinging his axe wildly. The blade cleaved into one of its legs, snapping it with a crunch. The creature screamed, but didn't slow.

Burmir thrust his spear at the first, but it twisted unnaturally, dodging with ease, and lashed out, slashing his cheek with a clawed hand.

Mithri fired a pair of arrows—one struck, burying into the bloated thorax of the beast. It shrieked and flailed, spraying green ichor as it tried to retreat.

Eloanil, bleeding from the shoulder, clenched her hand and chanted, a beam of pure silver light searing down from above and blasting one of the creatures across the path. It sizzled, legs twitching, but still dragged itself toward her.

Hager, teeth gritted, dropped low and swept his axe upward, cleaving through the hybrid's jaw. The top of its head flopped sideways, fangs still twitching.

Burmir finished the other with a brutal spear thrust through its chest, pinning it to a tree as its limbs writhed and fell still.

The silence afterward was sharp.

Eloanil fell to one knee, clutching her wound. Mithri's breath came in quick bursts. Hager sat on a rock and wiped green muck from his axe with a grimace.

"Lycanthropy *wasn't* supposed to work that way," Mithri said, shaking her head.

"It shouldn't," Eloanil murmured. "But it *did*."

Burmir looked down at the corpses. "Whatever we're chasing, it's mutating things it shouldn't. Nature's being rewritten."

The road ahead twisted toward the sea.

And the shadows behind them were growing legs.

Days passed beneath the shifting boughs of southern woodlands, where the sunlight filtered through the high leaves in golden shafts, and birdsong echoed like forgotten lullabies. The party pressed onward, their feet sore, supplies thinning, the road a mixture of mud trails and ancient moss-grown stones.

They crossed a small wooden footbridge, worn smooth by time and rain. Below, a narrow stream murmured over rocks and under fern-shaded banks. It was here they stopped, sitting on sun-warmed stones, chewing on the last of their dried meat and hard bread, washing it down with the final dribbles of flat ale from Burmir's skin.

Burmir held it upside down over his tongue. "That's it," he said grimly. "The gods take from us first what we love most."

"Could be worse," Mithri muttered. "Could've run out of socks."

They filled their waterskins at a spring that bubbled between tree roots, cool and sweet. Then they pressed on through meadows and sun-touched valleys until, as the forest thinned, Candlekeep rose on the horizon.

The coastal fortress-library loomed majestic on its cliffside perch, stone walls glowing golden in the light of late afternoon. Though they came not for books, the city still welcomed travelers with coin and need.

Candlekeep

They passed the outer wards and walked the cobbled streets until the salty breeze guided them to a tucked-away tavern: The Bright Sword.

The sign above the door depicted a shining blade piercing a black sun—ominous in paint, but warm in spirit. Inside, the tavern was cozy, filled with the scent of rosemary pork, garlic bread, and spilled ale soaked into a hundred-year-old floor.

Burmir dropped his pack with a grunt. “Room. Food. Drink. Preferably in that order. But I’ll take them all at once.”

A few coins clinked on the bar, and soon they had a room key, a hearty meal, and mugs heavy with froth.

They collapsed into chairs at a corner table, plates steaming with roasted vegetables, thick-cut pork, boiled eggs, and trenchers of coarse bread.

Hager took one bite, then leaned sideways and released a long, seismic fart, followed by a triumphant croak that rattled a nearby lantern.

The rest of the party froze mid-chew.

“By the Moonmaiden’s grace—” Eloanil gagged, holding her nose.

“You’ve killed dinner,” Mithri muttered, pushing her plate away. “It was alive, and now it’s gone.”

Burmir didn’t flinch. He lifted his mug, drained it in one long gulp, slammed it down, grabbed another, and repeated the process twice more.

“Three ales,” he growled, wiping foam from his beard. “And I feel hairier already.”

“Your chest’s gonna start singing dwarven ballads at this rate,” Mithri said.

Eloanil and Mithri, still wild with hunger despite the foulness in the air, tore into the meal like wolves—ravenous, efficient, and unwilling to waste a drop. They exchanged glances, daring one another to burp. They didn’t—but both were close.

After the plates were cleared and the ale flowing slow and content, a halfling woman in a patchy blue dress waddled over to their table, her hands wringing a flour-dusted apron.

“Beg pardon,” she said, voice soft but urgent. “Might any of you be willing to help with a small matter?”

Burmir leaned back. “What sort of matter?”

“It’s me husband,” she sighed, gesturing to the corner. “He’s down again. One too many tankards of bloatroot ale. Knocked over his cup, knocked over himself. I can’t lift the oaf, and he’ll catch chill on the floor. If you carry him home, I’ll pay—five silver, fair coin.”

Eloanil nodded. “We’ll take it.”

They stood and looked over. Sure enough, a very round halfling man lay sprawled beneath a nearby table, snoring like a congested bullfrog. A pool of ale formed around his feet, which he lapped at lazily in his sleep.

“Shame to wake him,” Hager said.

“Shame to smell him,” Mithri added.

They hoisted the halfling up, Burmir throwin him lazily over the shoulder. He gurgled and muttered, “Mmmph… crown’s on crooked…” and let out a belch that made Burmir squint.

They carried him out into the lamplit street. The halfling woman led the way a few doors down to a squat home with flowerpots in the window and laundry still hanging in the salty breeze.

They laid him gently on the feather-stuffed bed. He rolled over, snoring deeply.

The halfling woman placed five silver coins in Eloanil’s hand with a grateful smile. “Thank you kindly. He’s good at farming and bad at knowing when to stop.”

Burmir tipped his head. “We’ve all got our curses.”

They returned to the tavern, to warmth, to laughter, to the comforting stink of people who'd lived, fought, and eaten more than their share.

The road still stretched ahead, but tonight, it curled around Candlekeep and the scent of home —if only for a moment.

The night at the Bright Sword Tavern rolled on like a barrel of ale down a hill—loud, sloppy, and full of unexpected turns.

Burmir, cheeks red and beard damp with foam, leaned back in his chair. "What say we find ourselves a table with some dice, eh? Nothing wrong with a bit of sport after a meal that hearty."

A clink of bone dice from the far corner drew their attention—a round table surrounded by laughter, flashing tankards, and flushed faces. At it sat two women: a broad-shouldered dwarf woman with a silver nose ring and braids like coiled rope, and a young elf woman, strikingly beautiful, dressed in silk and clearly more accustomed to moonlight than mead halls. Her cheeks were flushed with wine, and her gaze sharp with stubborn pride.

"Room for more?" Hager asked, approaching the table.

"Room for fools and their coin," the dwarf woman grinned, motioning to empty stools.

They sat, coins were tossed into a shallow bowl in the center, and the dice began to roll.

The game was called Stones and Skulls, a tavern favorite. Each round, players rolled two bone dice and called their total before the throw. Hitting your number exactly doubled your bet. Close, and you held. Miss badly—and you paid double into the pot. Easy to play, harder to win with a tankard in hand.

Burmir rolled a clean twelve and let out a wild "HA!", scooping up a handful of silver coins. Mithri played conservatively but walked away with a few extra pieces, and Eloanil shocked everyone by calling three straight throws like a prophetess of chance.

In an hour, the party had taken in nearly 25 silver between them, while the elf woman, who introduced herself as Eril, was down to her last two coins.

She stared at the bowl, brow furrowed. "This is my last silver. If I lose again…" she muttered, then reached down and unclasped something beneath the table.

"I bet this," she declared, slapping down a fine silken elven bra, pale blue and embroidered with silver vines.

Burmir's eyes widened. Hager choked on his ale. The dwarf woman roared with laughter.

"Deal," the dwarf said, throwing her dice.

Eril followed. She rolled—poorly. Snake eyes.

The table burst into a mixture of laughter and hoots as the dwarf woman leaned over and snatched up the dainty garment. “This’ll hang over my hearth like a battle banner.”

Eril groaned and buried her face in her hands.

“Panties next?” Mithri teased, elbowing Eloanil.

Eloanil smirked. “That might be the tiebreaker round.”

Burmir leaned toward Eril, who was now half hiding behind a tankard, cheeks burning bright. “You played well, lass,” he said with a chuckle, placing a coin on the table. “Drink’s on me.”

She gave a tired smile, and as she reached for the cup, Burmir’s hand slid casually to her thigh. “Cheer up. Nothing’s worse than losing dignity in public—except not drinking after.”

Eril gave him a smirk. “If you buy the next one, I might let you win a sash.”

Meanwhile, the dwarf woman leaned back and poured herself another drink, the elven bra now draped from her shoulder like a trophy.

“You lot seem sharp,” she said. “Let me tell you something—*sharp* folks ought to keep their eyes open in Candlekeep.”

Burmir raised an eyebrow. “You mean beyond the dice thieves and flirtatious elves?”

The dwarf nodded seriously now, lowering her voice. “Heard things from the cellar folk. Storage tunnels beneath the cliffs. There’s a cult cell hiding down there. Ashen Flame by

their smell. They've got folk disappearing. Not soldiers—scribes. Historians. Folk who know old stories."

Eloanil's brows furrowed. "They're looking for something. Same as us."

The dwarf nodded again. "You didn't hear it from me, but they've got a mark on one of the old vaults. Something to do with a sealed tome. A name that hasn't been read aloud in centuries."

Burmir took a long pull from his mug. "Then maybe we've found our next turn in the road."

The dice cooled. The drinks settled. But the fire in the tale remained.

And beneath the cliffs of Candlekeep, something stirred in silence—pages turning, flames whispering, and secrets waiting to be found.

The tavern dimmed slowly into quiet. After several more rounds of laughter, dice, and ale—some won, some lost—the party stood from their table with flushed faces and heavy limbs. Eril bid them a goodnight with a coy wink, while the dwarf woman saluted them with the elven bra still slung from her shoulder like a war medal.

Their room upstairs was small, stuffy, and far too warm, but they didn't care. Sleep came fast, heavy and dreamless, broken only by a rooster that crowed too close and too loud at dawn.

By the time they descended into the streets, Candlekeep's stone walls were basked in soft morning light, the sea breeze brushing off the night's stink of spilled ale and body heat.

But the party was already shaking off their hangovers.

There was work to do.

With directions quietly passed from the dwarf woman in the tavern and a few whispered hints from a scribe in the market square, the party made their way to a cracked drainage grate tucked behind a crumbling section of the city's outer cliff path—a forgotten tunnel leading into the old Candlekeep sewers, rarely patrolled, long ignored.

The stink hit them instantly. Stale water, rotting moss, and something far older—ritual smoke and scorched wax. The tunnel walls were slick, runed bricks half-submerged in the murky channel.

Burmir unslung his spear. "Never trust a city that smells more dangerous underneath than above."

They moved slowly, boots splashing, lantern light glinting off damp stone and the occasional rat eye. Then they saw it—a faint orange flicker, deeper in the tunnel ahead.

A doorless archway opened into a round chamber carved from ancient rock, lit by low-burning braziers. Within, six cultists in black robes, marked with the curling insignia of the

Ashen Flame, stood around a pedestal where a scroll sat unrolled beside an open brazier of burning herbs.

They turned as the party entered—silent at first, then drawing curved daggers from within their sleeves.

“Time for prayers, is it?” Hager growled.

The fight broke fast.

Burmir lunged first, spear catching a cultist clean in the chest and pinning him to the wall with a wet crunch. Hager barreled into two more, swinging his axe in a tight arc that tore into robes and bone.

Mithri kept to the shadows, loosing arrows into those who reached for incantations. One crumpled with a shaft through the throat before he could speak.

Eloanil called out, her voice sharp, divine light blasting the central brazier outward in a spray of burning coals. The cultists screamed and staggered as fire and embers seared their arms and faces.

One cultist—their leader, dressed in deeper crimson with a bronze mask and brand-marks across his chest—chanted a guttural phrase and lifted his staff. A sheet of flame leapt toward the party, but Burmir threw himself forward and knocked the staff from the man’s hands.

The fire sputtered. The spell died.

The remaining two cultists tried to flee but were cut off by Mithri and Hager, dispatched with quick efficiency.

The leader stumbled back, raising his hands. “Spare me,” he wheezed. “I have answers. You’ll need them.”

Burmir held the bloody tip of his spear to the man’s throat. “Then start talking before I lose interest.”

The captured priest of the Ashen Flame panted, blood running from his nose. “We serve the buried fire... we follow the path... to Duramad’s Heart. It's real. Beneath the mountain. But it must be unlocked—three seals. Three oaths. You’ve already found one.”

Eloanil’s eyes narrowed. “Where are the others?”

The priest smiled—bloody, but smug. “In the Evermoors… and in the vaults of Yartar. But you’ll never make it there in time.”

Burmir knocked him unconscious with the butt of his spear.

“Tie him up,” he said.

The old city above them hummed with light and knowledge. But beneath it, darkness still bled upward, and the party had scratched open another wound.

Time to follow the fire again.

They dragged the bound priest through a side passage of the sewer, the air thick with decay and dripping stone. Burmir found an old maintenance room, long forgotten—a place with rusted iron hooks still bolted to the walls, broken barrels, and puddles of old brine. They threw the cultist down on the cracked stone floor, the bronze mask half-hanging from his bruised face.

Torchlight danced across the walls, flickering on faces grim and silent.

Hager knelt beside him, drew a long knife, and began cleaning his nails with its tip. “You’ve got one more chance to talk *properly,* friend.”

The priest gave a strained smile through split lips. “You already hit me. You’ll get nothing more.”

Burmir crouched and reached into his pouch, drawing out a pair of rusted iron pliers. “We’ll start with the nails. See if you still feel like a holy man by the time we reach the tongue.”

Eloanil turned away, arms crossed, her eyes hard but distant.

Mithri stood in the shadows, silent, arms folded. She didn’t stop them.

Hager pressed a boot against the man’s chest as Burmir gripped his left hand.

“First question,” Burmir growled. “What do you know about Myruulthar?”

The priest laughed weakly. “More than you ever will.”

The dwarf twisted the pliers around the man’s thumbnail until there was a wet snap and a howl. Blood welled instantly.

“Try again,” Hager said, pressing harder.

The priest screamed and thrashed, eyes wide. “He’s dying! That’s the truth! Myruulthar... he was old even when the world was stone. But he *refuses* to die. His breath is poison now—his blood, ash—but he breathes still.”

Eloanil stepped closer, voice like ice. “How?”

“Rituals… old magic,” the priest wheezed. “We feed him ley energy—raw life, stolen from beneath the earth. From stone lines. Places where the Weave is thick.”

Burmir pulled another nail loose with a slow twist. The priest howled again, veins bulging in his throat.

“Where’s it being done?”

The cultist spat blood. “You don’t know what you’re playing with. You’ll all burn.”

Hager punched him in the side of the jaw, snapping his head back.

“Where.”

The priest whimpered now, his pride sagging under the weight of blood and pain.

“The Marsh of Tun. There’s a stone circle… hidden deep where the mist never lifts. The ritual site’s there. Protected. Watched.”

Burmir raised the pliers again.

“No more—please!” the cultist gasped, breathing ragged. “There’s a gate below the marsh… tied to the heart. It opens only when all three leylines feed it. They’ve found the first. And they’re close to the second.”

Eloanil looked to the others. “That’s enough.”

Burmir stood, breathing heavily. He wiped the blood from his gloves and kicked the priest hard in the ribs for good measure. The man passed out cold.

Mithri crouched beside the crumpled form. “Do we kill him?”

“Not yet,” Eloanil said. “He may be useful.”

Burmir wiped his blade. “And if not—there are still teeth left.”

Above them, Candlekeep shimmered in morning light.

But below, in the muck and shadow, the truth had been torn out like a root—Myruulthar lives, and the Marsh of Tun whispered his name beneath the fog.

The sewer stench long behind them, the party returned to the Bright Sword Tavern, their boots muddy, their knuckles scraped, and blood still dried beneath their nails. But they carried something far more dangerous than filth—knowledge.

So, naturally, they ordered ale by the pitcher. Days passed drinking and eating.

A new day dawned when Mithri was the first to lift her mug high. “To fingernails and bleeding tongues!”

Hager clanged his against hers. “To the Marsh of Shit!”

Eloanil downed her ale in one go, slammed the mug down, and growled, “And to whoever made me sober for three whole days.”

They laughed, loud and long, and ordered plates heaped with garlic pork, crusted bread, and pickled onions. As the tavern filled with the glow of lanterns and spiced food, even Eloanil and Mithri—usually more reserved—drank deep and freely.

Burmir poured ale over his face, soaking his beard, then belched with a noise like thunder rolling through a mine shaft. “That’s *living*,” he bellowed. “Ale in the gut, dirt on the boots, and pain in the wrists.”

They had just reached the part of the night where insults turned to compliments and every story was suddenly funnier than the last when a thin, hunched man shuffled up to their table. He wore a long, dusty coat and massive, thick-rimmed spectacles so heavy they slid halfway down his nose. He clutched a stack of scrolls and parchment tied in twine under one arm.

“Erm… beg pardon, fine warriors,” he said in a timid tone, adjusting his glasses. “I don’t mean to intrude.”

Burmir leaned in. “You’re already doing that, friend.”

The man cleared his throat. “Name’s Mr. Wicker. I’m, ah… an archaeologist.”

Eloanil raised a brow. “And you thought we looked like... what? Professors?”

“No! No, but perhaps... professionals?” Wicker chuckled nervously, then continued. “I’m working on a dig, you see. An old manor—sunken into the lower quarter of the city over generations. We’ve uncovered stonework, remnants of an elven noble house long vanished. The city archivists are interested, but the labor is slow... and costly.”

Burmir’s eyes lit up like a gold vein in a torchlight shaft. “Treasure?”

“Well,” Wicker said cautiously, “*historical value*, yes. But coin too. I can pay you—say, eight silver a head, for half a day’s digging.”

Hager leaned back, grinning. “Silver to shovel dirt. I like this town.”

The party agreed, and before long, they followed Wicker through Candlekeep’s winding lower alleys to a crumbling estate surrounded by canvas tarps and wooden frames. The manor was half-sunken into the earth, with skeletal walls and vines grown thick over ancient columns. He handed each of them a **shovel** and gestured toward a large section of flagged stone courtyard that had to be cleared.

“Just dig carefully. You’ll know if you hit something.”

They worked for hours, sweat pouring, backs straining, voices rising.

Burmir, shirtless and covered in dust, groaned, “This is *not* what dwarves mean when we say we dig.”

“You just want to dig when gold’s involved,” Eloanil muttered, wiping sweat from her brow.

Mithri cursed under her breath. “My left shoulder’s gone numb. If we don’t find something soon, I’m turning this shovel into a javelin.”

Then—

clink.

Burmir’s shovel struck something solid.

He dropped to his knees and brushed away the dirt with his fingers, revealing the edge of an old coin pouch, cracked leather, brittle with age. Inside, a handful of ancient elven coins shimmered faintly with faded runes and gold-capped edges.

Burmir quickly pocketed the lot, casting a sideways glance to see if Wicker was watching. He wasn’t.

“Just rocks,” Burmir called out. “Flat ones.”

They continued, unearthing more artifacts as they worked—a silver-handled serving knife, its blade bent but ornately etched with ivy; a small bronze mirror cracked down the middle, with the ghostly imprint of a long-dead face still somehow clinging to its surface; a delicate crystal goblet half-buried in blackened soil, surprisingly intact.

Hager wiped sweat from his forehead. “This noble house sure liked drinking. They’d have fit right in.”

Eloanil turned over the goblet in her hands. “There’s still magic clinging to some of this. Nothing strong… just memory.”

Mithri paused and looked toward the sun above. “Hard work. But I’ll take dirt and gold over spiders and curses.”

From nearby, Wicker called out, “Marvelous! Marvelous finds!”

Burmir smirked to himself, patting the hidden pouch of coins. “Aye. And some things never even make it to the archives.”

The sun began to dip, and the dust began to settle.

But beneath Candlekeep’s soil, more stories waited. And some of them, Burmir suspected, still had teeth.

The afternoon sun hung low, casting long shadows across the broken courtyard where the old manor’s bones lay buried. Dust drifted through beams of golden light, and the scrape of shovels, the grunt of effort, and the occasional muttered curse were the only sounds that echoed between the cracked stone walls.

Mithri, wiping a streak of sweat from her cheek with the back of her arm, drove her shovel into the dirt once more—and struck something solid. But not stone. Wood.

Thock.

She paused, leaned in. Her eyes narrowed.

“Got something,” she called out. “Feels... different.”

The others rushed to her side. Together, they dug with renewed purpose, brushing away centuries of packed soil with hands and blades, until the shape revealed itself fully.

A wooden casket. Not rotted, but preserved unnaturally well, its surface etched with intricate carvings of roses, moons, and spiraling thorns. Its lid bore a sigil none of them recognized—an ancient sun swallowed by shadows.

Mr. Wicker came stumbling down the mound, scrolls flapping and spectacles fogged. “Don’t —don’t touch it! That’s not just a coffin—that’s history!”

He dropped to his knees beside it, mouth agape. “By the gods, look at these carvings... Second Epoch styling, high elven hands but repurposed—gothic overlays… this is *monumental.* We must draw it. Record it. This is the find of my life.”

He pulled out his charcoal stick and began frantically sketching the casket, muttering in awe, oblivious to the scent of unearthed death that was slowly rising from the soil.

“Whatever’s in there,” he said breathlessly, “could rewrite the lineage of Candlekeep’s noble lineages. Maybe even predate them.”

Hager stood behind him, frowning.

“Or it’s a box full of old socks.”

He tapped the casket with his shovel.

“Seriously, who buries something like this under a damn garden?”

Mr. Wicker didn’t respond, lost in his academic frenzy.

Hager shrugged.

“Sod it.”

With one heavy swing, he smashed the lid open.

The top cracked with a splintering roar, and the lid tumbled aside.

Inside—

A man.

Pale as ivory, dressed in midnight blue robes with silver trim. He lay still, arms crossed, his skin flawless and unmarred by time. His hair was dark and smooth, tied in a single braid across his chest.

For a heartbeat, no one moved.

Then—

The eyes opened.

Piercing, bloodless eyes of red.

And the mouth drew back in a slow, snarling grin.

Fangs.

“Sunlight,” he whispered, lips curling.

Then he screamed, a piercing, inhuman shriek as the sunlight lanced across his face. His skin smoked and cracked. He thrashed, throwing himself from the casket with an explosion of dirt and ancient velvet. The scream turned to a snarl, and he lunged.

Hager was the first to be hit—thrown backwards with supernatural force, the vampire’s claws tearing across his chest. Blood flew in arcs over the stone.

“Get back!” Eloanil shouted, grabbing a shovel and swinging it with both hands. It struck the vampire across the jaw with a sickening crunch—but it barely staggered him.

Mithri leapt forward, dagger in hand, plunging the blade into the creature’s side. It shrieked again and backhanded her, sending her crashing into a stack of excavation tools, blood running from her nose.

Burmir grappled the vampire from behind with a pickaxe, driving it into its shoulder. “Hold still, ye pale shit!” he yelled.

The vampire twisted, elbowed him in the gut, and knocked him sprawling. Then it turned—

—and landed full upon Mr. Wicker.

The scholar screamed as claws raked through his chest, tearing through parchment and bone alike. His spectacles shattered on impact. One more scream—and then the vampire ripped him apart, sending blood spraying across the courtyard walls.

“No!” Eloanil screamed, hurling a lantern at the beast. The glass shattered, flame licking across the vampire’s robes.

Sunlight and fire—two agonies at once.

It screeched, face burning, retreating into the shadow of a collapsed column.

“Now!” Mithri growled, bleeding from her scalp. “Push it back!”

They surrounded it, using tools, shards of broken iron, and whatever silver-tipped relics Wicker had brought. Hager drove a pick into the ground at its feet, pinning part of its robe.

Eloanil, glowing with divine light, raised her hand—and a searing burst of radiance flashed across the stone. The vampire howled and crumpled, smoke rising from its skin.

It didn’t move again.

The silence afterward was heavy and sour with blood.

They stood panting, covered in wounds and dust and gore. Mr. Wicker’s body lay mangled and lifeless, his hands still clenched around torn parchment.

Burmir sat down hard, cradling a broken rib.

“Well,” he coughed, “guess he found history.”

Mithri wiped blood from her brow. “Next time someone asks us to help with digging... say no.”

Eloanil just stared at the ashes in the corner of the courtyard, eyes distant, lips drawn tight.

Something had been buried for a reason. And they had just unleashed a piece of the past.

The vampire’s ashes had long since cooled in the courtyard dust, and Mr. Wicker’s torn parchment had been left in the hands of Candlekeep’s archivists—along with a warning: some doors are meant to stay sealed.

The party took their time recovering. **Two weeks** passed in the Bright Sword Tavern, days blurred with drink, food, laughter, and the occasional retelling of their sewer raid and accidental vampire awakening.

But eventually, the road whispered again.

The Marsh of Tun awaited—its name always spoken with a touch of disdain by those who knew it. And the party had unfinished business with flame cults and stolen ley energy.

On their final morning, they ate like prisoners on last meals—trays of steaming pork, onions in wine sauce, loaves of salted bread, and eggs boiled to bursting. They drank enough ale to fill not only their bellies but their waterskins, muttering about how it was better to drink fermented barley than swamp water.

Marsh of Tun

Outside the tavern, a stout black carriage waited, hitched to two heavy draft horses and manned by a narrow-eyed driver with no desire for conversation. The party climbed in, tossing their gear beside them, and the carriage rolled out of Candlekeep’s gates, wheels creaking against the cobblestones.

The week-long journey to Easting took them through some of the loneliest, most wind-bitten terrain the coastlands had to offer.

They passed vast grassy plains, golden in the wind, with old stone walls half-swallowed by earth. Occasionally, lone trees dotted the landscape, their twisted branches gnarled against the sky like dead fingers. Rocky ridges broke the monotony—spires of grey stone rising from the soil like the bones of ancient giants. Wild goats stared from atop high ledges, silent and judging.

Further inland, the grass gave way to valleys of dead trees, their bark flaked off, hollow trunks groaning in the breeze. Wind whistled through broken branches, and the sky remained an eternal iron grey.

By the end of the week, the roads grew muddy, and the air hung damp with a pungent heaviness.

They reached Easting, a weather-worn village where everyone seemed to carry a lantern even in daylight. The locals gave wary glances, muttered about “the lights in the water” and “singing from the fog.”

From there, the party struck out on foot, following a winding hunter’s trail that led straight into the Marsh of Tun.

The air turned foul. The world became a sludge of green rot and black water. Misty illusions drifted between gnarled trees—some showing long-lost faces, others whispering lies in voices barely heard. Poisonous bogs lay hidden beneath harmless moss, and more than once, someone’s boot sank too deep and had to be hauled out with curses.

“Place smells like Burmir’s feet,” Hager muttered.

“And walks like his bladder,” Mithri replied, hopping over a log.

Hours passed, and the wetland thickened—no more trail, only reeds, water, and suspicion.

Then came the croaks.

Six **bullywugs**—amphibious, stinking humanoids with long tongues and rusted spears—rose from the mire. Their eyes bulged with greed, and their webbed hands gripped stone blades and scavenged iron.

One barked in broken Common: “Gold or blood! Your choice!”

“Both it is,” Burmir growled, already drawing his spear.

The fight exploded in an instant.

A bullywug leapt and landed on Hager’s chest, stabbing with a jagged blade. Hager roared and headbutted it, sending it flying into the water with a splash. Mithri loosed an arrow that tore through a frog-man’s leg, pinning it to a tree as it screamed in a croaky gurgle.

Eloanil hurled divine light at two of them, the sacred flare blasting green slime from their bulging hides, forcing them back. Burmir skewered one clean through the gut and turned just in time to parry another’s club.

A bullywug wrapped its tongue around Mithri’s ankle and yanked—she crashed into the mud. The creature leapt to finish her, but Hager’s axe caught it midair, cutting it in half with a wet squelch.

The remaining two turned to flee.

One didn’t make it far—Burmir hurled a spear clean through its back.

The other vanished into the fog, croaking wildly.

They stood panting in the marsh water, wounds stinging, covered in muck and bullywug blood.

“Is there any place on this damn coast that doesn’t involve us getting stabbed?” Hager muttered.

“If there is,” Burmir said, pulling his spear from a corpse, “we’re probably not going there.”

The fog thickened.

And deep within the marsh, something watched.

The Marsh of Tun grew stranger with every step. The water no longer simply clung to their boots—it seemed to whisper around their ankles. Glowing fungi bloomed along tree roots like ghost-fire, and faint lights danced just out of reach between twisted cypress and drooping moss.

Eloanil paused as a cold breeze passed through her cloak. “The Weave is... torn here,” she murmured. “This place feels *wounded*.”

“No trail,” Hager muttered. “Just madness.”

Suddenly spirits appeared.

The Marsh of Tun grew stranger with every step. The water no longer simply clung to their boots—it seemed to whisper around their ankles. Glowing fungi bloomed along tree roots

like ghost-fire, and faint lights danced just out of reach between twisted cypress and drooping moss.

Eloanil paused as a cold breeze passed through her cloak. “The Weave is... torn here,” she murmured. “This place feels *wounded*.”

“No trail,” Hager muttered. “Just madness.”

That’s when the spirits appeared.

At first, only flickers—shapes in the fog that twisted like smoke, faces forming and vanishing in the blink of an eye. Then they began to circle, drifting low above the black water—swamp spirits, the lost echoes of those who died here, now reduced to soft voices and curious glimmers.

One passed through Mithri’s arm. Her breath caught in her throat.

“I saw… fire,” she whispered. “A burning gate.”

Burmir lowered his spear slightly, wary. “They’re not hostile. Not yet.”

The spirits parted suddenly, the air thickening. From behind a curtain of hanging moss stepped a dwarf—or what had once been one.

He wore a crown of vines and bones, hair wild and knotted with moss, his beard filled with feathers, teeth, and beads. His robes were patchworks of hide and living bark, and his eyes glowed faint green, the same hue as the swamp.

He walked barefoot through the muck as if it were dry stone.

“Leave,” he said hoarsely, raising a hand etched with runes. “This place is sacred. I guard what still remembers.”

“We’re here for knowledge, not to defile it,” Eloanil replied calmly.

Burmir stepped forward, raising a hand in dwarven greeting. “You’re one of the old ones. You know Duramad?”

The druid tilted his head, moss shaking from his shoulders. “Duramad the Maker. The Vault-Warder. The Father of Stone. Yes... yes, I know the name.”

He waved a hand, and the swamp parted in a circle of reeds and stillness, revealing a stone shrine half-sunken in black water. It bore the mark of Duramad: the hammer-and-chain etched in silver over a pillar of petrified wood.

“Few walk this far,” the druid rasped. “Fewer walk back. You seek the Heart, don’t you?”

Eloanil’s eyes narrowed. “How do you know?”

He raised both hands and whispered words in old Dwarvish. Vines curled around his arms. The fog pulsed. Then—

The world *shifted*.

Their eyes glazed, their senses left them—and they were cast into vision.

They stood in a chamber vast and dark, stone walls carved in dragonlike glyphs. At its heart lay Myruulthar, the dragon—not dead, but dying. Great patches of scale were gone, revealing withered muscle and blackened bone. His breath came slow, rattling like distant thunder. Around him, robed priests circled, chanting, their hands raised over a black crystal the size of a boulder.

Duramad’s Heart.

It pulsed like a beating organ, but its beat was wrong—*off*, twisted. Tendrils of arcane power bled from it, feeding into Myruulthar’s open wounds, halting decay, warping flesh.

The head priest turned, his face hidden by flame-shaped gold. “He shall rise again,” the voice said. “The realms will bow to the fire reborn.”

The vision shattered like glass.

They stood once more before the shrine, gasping.

The druid looked at them solemnly.

“You see now,” he said. “They do not wish to serve the dragon. They wish to *use* it. Turn the Heart from its rightful purpose—to forge, to bind—and twist it into fuel for a tyrant’s rebirth.”

Burmir grunted, still catching his breath. “Where is the Heart now?”

The druid pointed east. “Buried. Hidden. But the Order digs. They’re close to unlocking it. You must reach the Evermoors. There lies the second seal.”

He pressed a muddy hand to Burmir’s chest.

“You carry a promise in stone. Don’t let it break.”

The swamp fell silent again.

The spirits watched.

And the party knew—the next steps would lead them deeper still, into ancient oaths, dragon blood, and the fire that refused to die.

Hill of Lost Souls

Two weeks passed under a burning sun and brooding skies. The journey from the Marsh of Tun to the fabled Hill of Lost Souls tested every muscle, every ounce of patience the party had left.

They marched through jagged ravines, over sun-baked rock plateaus, and across ancient trails where bones crumbled underfoot. At night, the wind carried mournful sounds—howls mistaken for wolves, whispers mistaken for memory. The land grew quiet the closer they drew to the hill, as if the very earth held its breath.

At last, they stood before it.

The Hill of Lost Souls rose like a jagged tooth from the surrounding terrain, covered in sharp stone outcroppings and rusted weaponry embedded in the ground like forgotten gravemarkers. Dead banners fluttered in the wind—what remained of dwarven colors, tattered and faded.

“Here,” Burmir said softly. “This is where they made their stand. Dwarves of the Red Forge… against orcs… and a dragon.”

Scars of ancient battle still marred the hill. Burned trees, blackened rock, and scorched furrows carved by talons long buried. A silence settled over them as they climbed, crunching over splintered bones and broken helms.

And then, the earth trembled.

A low rumble echoed from the crest of the hill.

They reached the top and saw a massive skull of a dragon, half-buried in cracked stone, its fangs like stone pillars, its eye sockets wide and staring at the horizon. Black runes pulsed faintly across its surface.

And beside it stood three skeletal champions, once-dwarves, now twisted by necromancy. Their armor was fused to bone, their eyes burning with ghostly fire. They drew ancient weapons—one wielding a two-headed axe, another a shattered tower shield, the third a flail that hissed with pale flame.

The dragon skull's eyes flared blue, and with a bone-scraping groan, its massive jaw began to open.

“Back to battle…” it said in a voice like wind over a grave. “Blood was promised…”

Without warning, the champions charged.

Mithri loosed two arrows into the first skeleton, but it raised its shield just in time—one arrow shattered on impact, the second splintered through its ribs. Burmir surged forward with a roar, driving his spear into the flail-wielder’s chest. The creature didn’t fall. It turned its burning gaze toward him and slammed the flail into his side, sending him sprawling with a howl of pain.

Eloanil summoned divine light and hurled it at the axe-wielder, searing its skull and blackening half its helm. The creature roared in silence and swung, missing Hager by inches.

Hager countered with a crushing blow from his axe that split the champion’s spine, dropping it in two twitching halves.

“Get that damn skull shut!” he shouted.

The dragon skull’s mouth widened, and a swirling vortex of necrotic energy began to form inside its maw, pulling air and light into itself.

Mithri sprinted across the stones and leapt up onto the side of the skull, driving her dagger deep into a runed glyph above the eye. The light in the glyph flickered.

The skull screamed.

Eloanil threw another wave of radiant energy, this time into the skull’s gaping mouth. The scream doubled. The skeletal shield-bearer lunged for her but was intercepted by Burmir, who tackled it into the rocks and pinned it down, stabbing with all his strength.

The last champion, still burning, charged Hager again. They locked in a brutal contest of strength—axe versus shield—and with a mighty shout, Hager shoved it back and cleaved through its jaw and helm, dropping it for good.

Mithri climbed higher, dagger still in hand. “One more to go!”

She slammed her blade into the final glyph—and the skull exploded with a burst of wailing wind and spectral fire. She was thrown free, tumbling down the hill's side. Eloanil caught her with a burst of divine magic before she hit the rocks.

Silence returned.

The skull went dark.

Only the wind remained.

The champions lay broken, their bones turning to ash. The battlefield had been disturbed, but not conquered.

Burmir stood slowly, clutching his side. "That dragon wanted to speak again. But not with words."

"The dead don't forget," Eloanil whispered, staring at the ashes. "But neither do we."

They bound their wounds, gathered what remained of their strength, and looked east.

The wind still howled around the Hill of Lost Souls, its stones scattered with the dust of old bones and dying fire. As the party gathered themselves, tending to bruises and cracked ribs, Mithri strayed a little from the others. Something had pulled at her during the fight—not a sound, but a presence.

She followed it down a slope where the stone gave way to moss-choked roots and shattered weapons, half-buried beneath the soil.

There, nestled under a cracked elven helm and the curled hand of a long-dead warrior, she saw a bow. Unlike any she'd seen.

Elegant but fierce—its limbs crafted from darkwood, veined with silver inlays that shimmered faintly as her fingers neared them. Old elven runes were carved along its curve, glowing softly with latent magic. The bowstring seemed woven from starlight, taut and unbreaking.

Burmir had followed and crouched beside her. "That what I think it is?"

Mithri nodded slowly. "This is Thal'yen, the bow of Aerenn Velnaris. He fought here. Died with the dwarves."

She lifted it, and it pulsed once in her grip. The weight was perfect. The magic—old, but waiting.

Back on the hilltop, Eloanil had found something else.

From within the shattered chest of the final skeletal champion, buried among the fragments of ancient armor, lay a stone fragment etched with the same markings as the other map pieces. Her breath caught.

“The last piece,” she whispered.

They gathered around, fitting it with the others they’d recovered—one from Dragonspear, one from the Fields of the Dead, another from Serpent Hill. When they aligned, the runes ignited, burning in sequence across the parchment until a final glyph pulsed at the center.

Burmir squinted at it. “It’s pointing us north. Through the wilds. Toward the High Forest.”

Eloanil traced the glowing path. “Then that’s where we go.”

The road led them away from the hill, from the ghosts of dwarves and dragons, and into the north—into the deep and lawless wilderness that stretched between the mountains like a sea of green and gold.

For days they traveled through the wild lands, where trees grew thick and the sky turned strange with morning mist and evening thunder. Creatures stirred in the brush: horned boars, long-necked stags, and great ravens that followed their journey overhead.

By a quiet stream, they met a circle of druids—six of them, clad in furs and bark-covered robes, their skin painted with leaves and vines. One of them, a tall woman with crow feathers in her hair, watched the party with unreadable eyes.

“You carry storm and stone,” she said to Burmir. “Fire and shadow follow you.”

Hager leaned on his axe. “Ain’t that the truth.”

They shared a small camp for a night, exchanging food and herbal tonics. The druids told tales of the Evermoors stirring, of leylines bleeding, of a darkness in the east where even the birds flew crooked.

The next morning, the party moved on, their path marked now not just by map, but by omen.

High Forest

The High Forest loomed ahead, ancient and alive.

And somewhere beneath its canopy, the secret of Duramad’s Heart waited to be found.

The High Forest was unlike anything the party had yet seen. Its canopy soared high like the arches of forgotten cathedrals, green and gold light filtering through countless layers of leaves. Every tree was ancient. Every breeze whispered in tongues older than stone.

But they were not welcome. Not yet.

As they crossed an old moss-covered bridge into the deeper woods, they were met not by beasts or bandits—but by silence. Then came the voices.

“Stop.”

A dozen figures stepped out from between the trees.

They were not warriors in the traditional sense. Their armor was bark and woven grass. Their weapons were bows strung with spider-silk and spears carved from ironwood. Their eyes glowed faintly green—the Guardians of the Root, old forest spirits bound into flesh. Some bore antlers. Others moved without sound even on fallen twigs.

"You are not of the forest," said the tallest of them, whose voice rustled like wind through a dry crown of leaves. "And yet you carry the breath of fire, the wound of stone, and the scent of rot."

Burmir gripped his spear, but Eloanil stepped forward, arms open. "We seek not to take. Only to understand. We follow the path left by Duramad… and by Myruulthar's shadow."

"You carry oaths and ash," another guardian said. "Before you step deeper, you must face the woods—not with strength, but with soul."

A circle was formed. The party was separated, each given a task of silence and memory.

Mithri was shown the face of someone she lost—a sister slain by orcs. She was asked if vengeance had made her stronger… or just alone.

Hager saw himself as a child, forging his first blade beside his father's anvil, and was asked whether his strength served purpose—or just pride.

Burmir stood before a mirror made of leaves, shown his ancestors falling one by one in battles he could never win, and asked why he still chased gold when legacy weighed heavier.

Eloanil, meanwhile, stood in a grove where the air shimmered like starlight. The guardians stepped aside, allowing her to approach a half-sunken ruin overgrown with ivy and white flowers.

Here, stone arches loomed crooked and broken—remnants of an ancient elven watchtower. Vines coiled around cracked murals and pillars carved with battles long forgotten.

She stepped forward, kneeling beneath the archway. Her hands brushed the earth, and her voice whispered in the language of her kin.

The spirits answered.

They rose like mist from the stone—elven warriors, tall and proud, clad in silverwood armor and cloaks of moon-thread. They bore scars from long-forgotten wars and held curved blades that shimmered faintly in the dim forest light.

One stepped forward. His face was calm, his eyes sad.

"We fell here, against flame and fang. Myruulthar darkened the sky above this place. But we stood. And now you stand in our stead."

Eloanil bowed her head. "We seek to end what still burns."

“You must follow the path,” the spirit said. “But beware. The Heart is not just a relic. It remembers pain. And if awakened wrong… it may awaken wrath.”

As she rose, the spirits slowly faded, their forms returning to the stone, to the leaves, to the roots.

The guardians, satisfied, stepped aside.

“You may pass,” the lead guardian said.

The deeper woods opened before them—older, darker, and full of quiet memory.

The path ahead was no longer one of distance alone. Now it was one of soul.

That night, they made camp in a small hollow beneath a towering silverbark tree. Vines draped over the branches like curtains, and the firelight glimmered off the thick moss that covered the stones.

The air was cooler now—the warmth of the lower forest slowly giving way to the breath of the highlands. The sky above was clear, stars winking through the canopy, and the distant sound of water could be heard: a river close by.

They laid out bedrolls, took off boots, and let tired bones sink into the earth.

Hager passed around his waterskin, the last of their good ale sloshing inside.

“I’ll miss this when it’s gone,” he muttered, taking a deep swig and coughing. “Tastes like home and bad decisions.”

Burmir grunted, puffing from his pipe, the smoke curling into the branches. “You say that every time we finish a skin.”

“Because it’s always true.”

Eloanil sat cross-legged near the fire, cleaning her dagger with a cloth, while Mithri returned from the brush carrying four skinned squirrels slung from her belt.

“Meat’s meat,” she said, shrugging. “You want better, find a tavern.”

They roasted the squirrels over open flame, seasoned with herbs they’d picked along the way. The smell filled the camp, warm and earthy.

Later, after the meal was done, the fire burned low and they wandered down to the nearby river—crystal-clear, cold, and fast-running. Laughing, cursing at the cold, they bathed naked in its shallows, splashing water and swearing revenge at whoever splashed first.

“Gods, it’s freezing!” Hager barked, clutching himself as he stepped out.

“Builds character,” Eloanil smirked, shaking water from her hair.

Burmir stood waist-deep in the river, his beard soaked and curling. “This counts as a sacred rite in the north. Cleansing your soul with mountain pisswater.”

Mithri dunked him from behind.

When they returned to the fire, dried off and content, the stars above seemed closer somehow. They sat in silence for a while, passing the pipe, watching the embers fade to red. The laughter dulled into tired smiles.

The journey from here would grow harsher.

And it did.

Weeks passed.

Lost Peaks

They crossed from the forest into the lower reaches of the Lost Peaks, and then further north into a maze of snow-streaked mountains and steep, narrow passes.

The path grew treacherous—stone trails eroded, some barely wide enough for one boot. Wind howled through the crags like wolves. They bundled themselves in extra layers, cloaks heavy with frost. Storms blew in fast, smothering the peaks in white.

More than once they were forced to halt for days, huddled in caves or under overhangs, waiting out bitter hail and lightning that struck the stone above like hammerblows from the gods.

One afternoon, crossing a snow-blasted ridge, the world rumbled beneath their boots.

“Avalanche!” Eloanil shouted.

The mountains roared. A wave of white thundered down from above—stone and snow. They sprinted for cover, diving into a hollow crevice just before the slide poured past like the sea. It shook the mountain. When the sound finally died, they emerged from the snow, covered, bruised, coughing—but alive.

They pressed on, battered but enduring.

Nights were bitter, fires hard to keep lit in the wind. Food grew scarce. Mithri hunted mountain hares with the runic bow, while Hager chewed strips of dried meat like a bear gnawing bark.

Still, they climbed.

Over narrow passes carved by wind and time, through old mining trails and through one cave where ancient dwarven runes spoke of a long-forgotten hall once buried by dragonfire.

They spoke little on these days—each footstep was too precious, each breath needed for the climb.

But when they reached the final ridge and the clouds broke, revealing the vast green mist-draped stretch of the lands to the north, there was a silence filled with awe.

Below, the final leg of their journey awaited.

And the heart of Duramad stirred.

At the heart of the Lost Peaks, among broken cliffs and ridges crowned with stubborn pines, the party made camp on a small, sheltered ledge. Below them, mist curled through hidden valleys, and the air was so thin it burned their lungs with every breath.

The sky above was bruised purple with twilight. The stones around them shimmered faintly in the dying light, some bearing ancient chisel marks and runes, half-worn by time and storm.

They moved with weary practice.

Hager stomped out a flat space and began building a stone ring for the fire. Mithri gathered fallen branches and pinecones, hands moving deftly even in the thin air. Eloanil knelt near a pile of stones, whispering small blessings for warmth and safety.

Burmir, pipe clamped between his teeth, was pounding stakes into the rocky ground with the head of his spear.

They cooked thin slices of rabbit caught earlier that day, sizzling the meat on flat stones heated by the fire. The smell lifted their spirits immediately.

As the stars blinked into view overhead, a figure approached from the rocky slope beyond their camp.

A dwarf—broad and squat, wrapped in a heavy wool cloak stitched with silver runes. His beard was braided into a thick rope, tucked neatly into his belt. Over his shoulder was slung a stone hammer, worn smooth with years of use.

He raised a hand in greeting.

“Well met, travelers. Name’s Brogli Stonebind. A stone-sage, if titles matter.” He smiled, teeth white against his weathered face. “I saw your fire. Thought maybe you’d need a bit of sense when it comes to old rocks.”

Burmir stood, arms folded. “Depends. You know how to read the old tongues?”

Brogli tapped the side of his nose. “Better than most priests know their own prayers.”

Eloanil beckoned him closer. “We found inscriptions today—half-buried under the frost. We couldn’t read them all.”

Brogli nodded and squatted near the fire, pulling a lump of chalk from his pouch and sketching rough runes onto a flat stone.

“These mountains were carved by the Red Hammer Clan... thousands of winters ago. They built sanctuaries, vaults, and war-chapels into the peaks. Your markings? They speak of the Vein of Oaths—the path to where the great ones hid what was too dangerous to destroy.”

“The Heart,” Burmir muttered, stroking his beard.

Brogli nodded. “Could be. Or something even worse.”

They passed a jug of warmed wine around the circle, the fire crackling and casting long shadows against the rocks.

Conversation turned easy after that.

Hager pulled a strip of roasted meat between his teeth and said, “Tell me, Brogli, you ever wrestled a troll barehanded?”

Brogli chuckled. “Wrestled my uncle once. Does that count? He smelled worse than a troll and swung fists heavier than a warhammer.”

Mithri sharpened her dagger idly. “You smell the same up close to either.”

Burmir puffed a cloud of smoke and leaned back. “Once tried wrestling a cave bear. Lasted five heartbeats. Still proud.”

Eloanil smiled faintly, wrapping her cloak tighter. “You dwarves and your fondness for painful memories.”

“They’re the ones that stick the best,” Burmir said.

Above them, the stars wheeled in slow circles, and the cold gnawed at the edges of their firelight.

The days that followed were carved in silence and wind.

Descending from the high ridges of the Lost Peaks, the party passed into cracked ravines and steep paths, following runes marked in ancient stone—some only visible in the morning frost, others behind waterfalls or buried under scree. Brogli remained with them, his fingers tracing meaning from every weather-worn rune, piecing together a route lost to most of the world.

One misty morning, with the sun hanging like a dull coin above the cliffs, they came upon a clearing hemmed by jagged boulders and pines older than any kingdom. At its center was a slab of blackstone framed by two towering statues of dwarves holding crossed hammers over a sealed archway set into the mountainside.

The arch was engraved with a vast ring of dwarven script, faded but not gone.

Burmir stepped forward, fingers brushing the worn edges. “This is it,” he whispered. “The Vault of Duramad.”

Eloanil traced the runes with her palm. “There’s a riddle...”

Brogli adjusted his cloak and leaned in, reading aloud in old dwarvish:

"To forge what none may break, you must break what none would forge.
To enter what is sealed, name not gold, but purpose.
Speak now what binds the worthy."

Silence.

The party stood still as frost danced in the morning air.

Mithri frowned. “Sounds like typical dwarven poetry—vague and proud.”

Burmir grinned. “Which means it’s about oaths.”

“Oaths, not gold,” Eloanil agreed. “The vault doesn’t guard treasure. It guards legacy.”

Burmir stepped forward, laid his hand on the central stone, and spoke in a clear voice:

“Honor.”

The runes pulsed once—then the earth shook.

With a grinding moan, the arch split open, the stone slab sliding downward to reveal a stair descending into shadow. Cold air rushed out, thick with dust and the echo of things long buried.

They descended in torchlight and silence.

The Vault of Duramad opened into a chasm of wonder.

A subterranean city, forged entirely of blackstone and silver-veined granite, lay before them—its towers arched like cathedral spires, its streets lined with statues and glowing runes. Above, no sky—only a massive dome of carved stone, lit by enchanted orbs that still flickered weakly after centuries of slumber.

“This place…” Hager breathed. “It’s alive.”

Burmir knelt, pressing his hand to the stone floor. “Built to last longer than memory. Duramad's folk knew what they were doing.”

But peace did not greet them.

As they passed into a great hall, a series of mechanical constructs stirred to life—hulking guardians of bronze and steel, powered by ancient runes and bound to one purpose: test the unworthy.

One construct charged with a roar of gears, a massive hammer arm slamming down into the stone. The party scattered, weapons drawn.

Mithri’s arrows pinged off its armor. Hager’s axe carved a groove into its chest but did not slow it. Eloanil raised a ward just in time to block a swipe that would’ve crushed them both. Burmir rolled beneath a flailing limb and jammed his spear into the base of its leg, twisting until something snapped.

With a great, hissing grind, the construct collapsed.

“Not guardians,” Burmir said, panting. “Judges.”

Further in, they met traps laid into the walls—stone steps that vanished beneath the weight of pride, spears that triggered when lies were spoken. They solved puzzles of runes, arranging glowing tiles in sequences that spelled dwarven virtues: truth, sacrifice, kin.

And as they moved deeper, the silence gave way to sound—low, pulsing, like the heartbeat of the mountain itself.

The Heart lay ahead.

And whatever waited beside it had not forgotten the fires of Myruulthar.

At the far end of the underground city, past crumbling bridges and empty halls carved with forgotten vows, the party came to a gate unlike any before.

Twin stone hammers crossed over an obsidian door, their faces inscribed with the same symbol seen in every corner of Duramad's legend—the chained flame.

Brogli stopped. "Beyond here is the soul of it all. The place of binding. The last true seat of the Stone-Father."

Burmir gave a single nod and pressed his palm to the seal.

The gates parted.

They stepped into the throne room of Duramad—a vast chamber of shadow and reverence. Pillars rose like towers, each carved with tales of war, craft, and sacrifice. At its center sat a great stone dais, and upon it, suspended by silver chains and pulsing with faint red light, hovered the Heart of Duramad.

It was not a gem nor a relic of beauty—it was a fragment of the world itself, shaped like a jagged boulder, its surface marked with glowing runes.

And it was cracked.

Hairline fractures spidered across its core, flickering with unstable light. The chains that held it trembled faintly, straining against some unseen pressure.

Eloanil stepped forward slowly. "It's alive. I can feel it… it remembers."

As her hand neared it, the room dimmed. Visions seized them.

They stood in an endless sky of fire and stars. Before them, Myruulthar soared—not the corpse-like horror of prophecy, but a magnificent, scaled creature of wisdom and age, coiled around mountaintops, his eyes full of light and sorrow.

He spoke in an ancient voice that echoed through memory.

"I forged peace in fire, and was broken in it. They sought my blood to stir war. They fed me lies. And now… I burn beneath the earth."

They saw priests of the Ashen Flame, carving into his body as he lay chained, siphoning power from his veins, pouring magic into the Heart not to preserve—but to control.

"The Heart was never meant for one will," Myruulthar's voice said. "It was made to bind *many*. They seek to bend it… and me."

Then the vision snapped.

The chamber shuddered. The Heart pulsed—unsteady, volatile, awakening.

"We can't leave it here," Burmir said. "They'll take it. They're close."

"They already followed us into the mountains," Hager said, gripping his axe. "They're here."

With sacred reverence but urgency, the party unhooked the chains and wrapped the Heart in cloth etched with runes of warding. Its weight was more than physical—it strained the mind, the soul. But they bore it.

And then the vault began to shake.

As they fled through the winding corridors and out into the wild hills beyond the peaks, the wind howled louder—not wind. Footsteps. Orders. Steel.

The Order of the Ashen Flame had arrived.

And not mere acolytes—their elite, cloaked in crimson armor, marked with gold flame sigils, weapons burning with the same fire that now pulsed in the Heart.

They gave chase, swift and merciless.

Arrows hissed through the air. Magic split the earth behind the party as they ran, the Evermoors looming ahead like a sea of mist and decay.

“Don’t stop!” Mithri yelled, clutching the wrapped Heart tight.

“They’ll have to take it from my dead hands!” Burmir growled.

“To them, that’s a convenience,” Hager shouted, swinging his axe back as a firebolt nearly caught his shoulder.

Evermoors

The path was long. The storm followed.

And the Heart, carried through the mist and stone, beat like a war drum in their hands.

The Evermoors swallowed them whole.

Endless bogs, jagged hillocks, and dark pools of stagnant water stretched beneath a sky of roiling grey. The mist clung thick as oil—twisting shapes and sound, distorting light and memory. Paths led nowhere. Footprints vanished behind them. Even time felt uncertain.

And always, the Heart of Duramad pulsed like a living thing beneath its runed wrappings, pulling heat and breath from their chests with each passing hour.

“They’re close,” Mithri muttered, squinting through the fog.

“Or already ahead,” Eloanil said grimly. “This land bends. To him.”

A moment later, shadows rushed them.

Ashen Flame ambushers, half-seen in the mist, struck with terrifying speed. The battle was blind chaos—arrows fired into fog, parried in silence. Spells burst in flashes of light, leaving afterimages that danced like ghosts.

A sword grazed Mithri's thigh. She spun, loosing two arrows that vanished into the gloom. Hager stood guard over Eloanil as she chanted a ward against illusions. Burmir roared into the mist, spear-first, skewering a man who hadn't yet fully emerged from the vapor.

The mists shifted again—and the swamp became a battlefield.

But wrong.

Burmir saw his father, crushed beneath a dragon's claw, screaming his name.

Mithri stood in her childhood village, flames consuming everything.

Hager stood alone, his axe broken, friends dead, Myruulthar above him in the sky, laughing.

Illusions.

"*It's not real!*" Eloanil shouted, her voice a surge of divine power that tore through the phantoms like sunlight through cobwebs.

The fog parted—

And revealed him.

Cloaked in crimson shadow, wearing a circlet of iron flame, stood Vaerin the Ashbound, a warlock lieutenant of the Order. His eyes were pits of coal. His voice burned.

"You were not meant to carry the Heart," he said, raising one hand. "You were meant to die retrieving it."

He unleashed a wave of fire, boiling the water at their feet, hurling Hager through the air. The dwarf crashed against a stone pillar, his chestplate cracking with the sound of bone beneath it. He didn't move.

"Hager!" Eloanil screamed.

Burmir charged Vaerin, roaring, spear in hand—but the warlock deflected the thrust with a flick of his gauntlet and sent a blast of shadow flame into Burmir's stomach, throwing him back.

Mithri moved like lightning, loosing three arrows—two were incinerated mid-air, but the third struck true, biting deep into Vaerin's shoulder. He screamed, staggered.

That was enough.

Eloanil unleashed a torrent of radiant energy, blinding white, directly into his chest. Vaerin shrieked and stumbled as his cloak caught fire, the flames consuming his spell focus.

Burmir dragged himself up, blood in his mouth, and hurled his spear—

It pierced Vaerin's heart.

The warlock fell to his knees, smoke pouring from his chest and eyes. "You… cannot stop… the flame..." he whispered.

Then he collapsed.

The swamp fell still.

They rushed to Hager. Eloanil laid her hands on him, divine light knitting shattered ribs, but he didn't wake immediately—his breathing shallow, his skin cold.

"He's alive," she finally said, shaking. "Barely."

Mithri sat beside her, soaked in mud and blood, the Heart cradled in her lap.

Burmir stood over Vaerin's body. "We're not meant to carry it," he repeated. "Then we carry it all the way."

The mists swirled again—but this time, they thinned.

The Evermoors had tested them. And they had not broken.

But the road ahead was red with fire—and not all wounds could be healed.

Yartar

The road to Yartar was long, winding beside the Dessarin River as the marshlands gave way to hills and scattered wood. Each mile carried the weight of the Heart, and each step pressed more tension into their limbs. Hager, though scarred and slow from the warlock's blow, walked on—gritting through pain and bearing his axe with even more stubborn pride.

By the time they reached the outer walls of the fortified river city, the storm clouds had broken. Boats crowded the docks, banners fluttered from stone towers, and noble crests adorned the buildings like polished masks. Yartar was a city of commerce, coin, and cloaked ambition.

The party made straight for the central keep, where the king's envoy, a man named Lord Vhaled Renn, was said to reside—a man trusted by the crown, known to deal with "delicate matters."

They were ushered into a long chamber with high ceilings, carved riverstone columns, and guards in gold-trimmed blue. Lord Renn sat at a table near the hearth, quill in hand, a goblet of wine beside him. He wore a close-trimmed beard, and his eyes were cold with calculation.

He looked up as they entered.

“Ah. The wanderers I was warned of. Come, tell me why you bring a storm to my gates.”

Burmir didn’t mince words. “We carry the Heart of Duramad. The Order of the Ashen Flame is moving to use it to restore a dragon that should’ve stayed dead.”

Lord Renn blinked, but didn’t look surprised. “You should not say such things in public.”

Eloanil stepped forward. “We were told you speak for the king. That you can help.”

“I *do* speak for him. But kings do not act on hearsay brought by wounded adventurers. Evidence. Witnesses. Documents. Nobles are not swayed by campfire tales.”

Mithri narrowed her eyes. “So you want proof while the world burns?”

Lord Renn set his quill down, stood, and walked to the window.

“There is a greater flame burning here than you know,” he said, voice low. “Three noble houses in Yartar have thrown secret support behind the Ashen Flame. Coin, influence, protection. They mask it with trade agreements and guild grants, but I have seen the signs.”

Burmir grunted. “Why haven’t you stopped them?”

“Because I don’t have the power,” Renn snapped. “Not without a scandal. Not without names. The king’s court is a nest of vipers dressed in velvet.”

Hager spoke, voice rough. “Then give us the names. We’ll drag them out in the street and let their lies bleed out.”

Renn turned back, something like amusement flickering in his eye. “Tempting. But crude.”

Mithri smirked. “We’re not here for court manners.”

“Very well,” Renn said, stepping closer. “House Marravin, House Hollcrest, and the lesser wing of House Arvellan. Their agents are working to smuggle artifacts of power from the north. One of them—Lady Marravin—has already opened her doors to a known priest of the Order.”

Eloanil folded her arms. “Then we need to get into that manor.”

Renn nodded slowly. “I can arrange an invitation. A masquerade is being held in three nights. Nobles and pretenders, masks and wine. I’ll get your names on the guest list. But after that… you’re on your own.”

Burmir looked down at the cloth-wrapped Heart, then back to the envoy.

“We've walked through fire and warlocks and dead gods. I think we’ll manage.”

Renn smiled faintly. “Then wear your masks well, adventurers. Because in Yartar, the blade is always closer than the wine.”

The masquerade at Lady Marravin's manor was a thing of glittering deception.

The grand hall was lit by chandeliers of crystal and silver, masked nobles swirling like crows dressed in silk. Music floated in the air, light and meaningless, hiding the true tension that crackled beneath every polite nod and whispered toast.

Burmir wore a black iron half-mask shaped like a snarling wolf. Hager donned a bronze mask with a sharp nose like a hawk's beak. Mithri's mask was silver ivy, Eloanil's a delicate white feathered veil. They passed unnoticed among the crowd, for now.

Mithri leaned close to Burmir as they approached the inner chambers. "This feels wrong. Like walking into a trap with a pretty ribbon on it."

"It is," Burmir growled under his breath. "Best traps usually are."

Inside the ballroom, under the massive banners of House Marravin, the real stage was set.

They saw him—the priest of the Ashen Flame, dressed in noble attire, laughing lightly among the lords and ladies, his hands trailing faint embers as he drank from a goblet.

Burmir's hand tightened on the hilt of his hidden blade. "That's our fox."

Lord Renn had done his part. An official accusation was planted. All the party needed to do was strike at the right moment and force the hidden rot into the light.

Eloanil raised her voice across the floor, calm but cold. "Lord Renn has words to share! Hear them!"

The music stopped. Faces turned. The masked priest stiffened.

Renn stepped forward, unmasking himself—his position undeniable—and spoke in a voice that rolled through the hall like a storm breaking.

"We accuse House Marravin and their guest, priest Sareth of the Ashen Flame, of treason. Of consorting with those who would wake ancient fire and break the world upon it."

Gasps. Whispers. A ripple of fear.

Lady Marravin stood, her mask of gold glittering. "Slander! Lies! You come into my home and accuse me without proof?"

Burmir tossed a sealed letter onto the table—the one Renn had recovered from an intercepted courier, proof of secret dealings between the house and the cult.

Sareth sneered, his hands already crackling with gathering magic.

"So be it," he said. "No more masks, then."

He tore the glamour from his body, revealing robes of burning crimson underneath, the sigil of the Ashen Flame pulsing across his chest.

A court battle erupted—nobles fleeing, guards rushing forward, steel flashing in candlelight.

The party drew their weapons.

Mithri shot first, an arrow piercing Sareth's shoulder, staggering him. Eloanil wove a shield of shimmering divine light around herself and Hager, who barreled into two cultist guards sent to intercept them.

Burmir faced off against Sareth himself, parrying a searing blade of conjured flame with his spear, the two locked in a brutal dance between stone pillars.

The battle raged through the hall, over overturned tables, shattered goblets, and spilled wine.

At last, Eloanil's magic crushed Sareth's defenses, and Burmir drove his spear into the warlock's gut, pinning him against a pillar where he slumped, coughing blood.

Silence fell.

The nobles, cowed and shamed, stared at the truth laid bare.

The cult's web had been torn apart—and Yartar had been spared from becoming a throne for fire.

Later, in the cool night air beyond the shattered manor, the party gathered under the stars with Lord Renn.

"Their plans are undone here," he said quietly. "But not everywhere."

Burmir spat into the dust. "They'll run north. Try to wake the dragon fully before we can stop it."

Eloanil nodded. "We have to strike first."

Renn laid a scroll in her hand. "A path through the Evermoors. Old roads only the king's trackers know. Take it. Go fast."

Hager looked up at the sky, scarred face grim. "One way or another, this ends with fire."

The party clasped arms, gathered their weapons, and set out again—northward, into the mist and storm, toward the final reckoning.

The Heart of Duramad pulsed against Burmir's side.

The battle for the realms had truly begun.

The Dragon and the Flame

The wind was knife-sharp as they climbed the last ridge.

The mountain temple of the Order stood at the summit of a blasted peak beyond the northern edge of the Evermoors, its spires blackened with soot, its gates etched in fire-shaped runes that pulsed like open wounds. The sky above it was a boiling storm of smoke and ash. No birds. No sound—save the low, distant chanting that echoed from within the stone.

“They’re already starting the ritual,” Eloanil said, eyes narrowed.

Burmir touched the Heart, now bound in silverthread cloth. “Then we’re not late.”

They advanced toward the gates, mist curling at their heels, weapons drawn, cloaks heavy with frost and soot. The outer courtyard was filled with shapes in the dark—cultists, hooded and armed with curved blades and fire-forged staves, turned all at once as the party crossed the threshold.

A horn was blown.

And then the charge.

The first wave hit hard—fanatics driven by flame, spells raining down like falling stars. Hager roared and met them with axe and steel, bones cracking beneath his swing. Mithri danced between the flames, arrows cutting through robes and skulls with uncanny precision.

Burmir hurled a spear into the lead mage, impaling him mid-incantation.

The courtyard was chaos—stone scorched, screams echoing off granite.

Then the second wave came.

Corrupted dwarves, their skin ashen, eyes burning with unnatural fire, once-brethren twisted by dark rites. Their armor was fused to flesh, their weapons part of their bodies—welded into place by flame and madness.

Burmir hesitated.

“I know these faces…” he whispered.

One of the dwarves growled in a voice like cracked stone: “Brother… you left us in the dark.”

“No,” Burmir muttered, gripping his weapon tighter. “I’m here to end it.”

The party surged forward.

Eloanil’s divine light burned the curse from one dwarf’s body before it could strike—he collapsed, twitching, free for a heartbeat before death took him. Hager clashed with a brute wielding a hammer that spewed molten sparks; Mithri covered him, dropping two more from behind with clean, cold shots.

The doors of the temple cracked open with a thunderous groan, and the ground shook beneath them.

From within came a scream—*not human, not dwarven, not beast*. It was the voice of something older.

Something waking.

They ran.

Through burning halls. Past shattered stone icons of Duramad. Over fallen acolytes and slain guardians. And then, at the very heart of the sanctum, in a great chamber hollowed into the peak itself, they found Myruulthar.

He was no longer dragon nor spirit—he was fire incarnate. His flesh was a ruin, bone visible through cracked scales, but the power he exhaled was unbearable. Veins of red light glowed across his body. His wings—half-melted—still stretched to the walls.

The Heart, they realized, was now embedded in his chest.

Tethered by chains of ritual energy, it pulsed in sync with his broken breath.

"You are late," he hissed, voice layered with agony and command. "But not too late to burn."

He rose.

The final battle began.

Burmir hurled himself at the binding runes, trying to sever the channels feeding power into Myruulthar. Eloanil raised both hands and summoned a wave of divine light, shielding them from the dragon's first gout of flame.

Hager charged, ducking a sweeping claw that shattered the marble floor, and drove his axe into the beast's leg—only to be thrown across the chamber into a pillar, coughing blood.

Mithri scaled a crumbled altar, loosing rune-tipped arrows into Myruulthar's throat and wing joints, sparks and black blood spraying in the torchlight.

The dragon shrieked.

He unleashed a breath of pure molten energy, scorching the walls and shattering the vault's ceiling. Stone rained down. Burmir was caught in the blast—his beard singed, his arm burned—but he stood firm, hacking through one of the power chains with his spear.

"Cut him *off* from it!" he roared.

The Heart pulsed wildly. The stone beneath their feet cracked.

Eloanil rushed forward, slammed her hands onto the chain's sigil and chanted, her voice burning with divine power. The rune exploded in golden light.

Two chains down.

Mithri leapt down beside the Heart, driving her dagger into the final link, and Burmir brought his spear down—

The chain snapped.

Myruulthar roared—not in fury, but in fear.

The Heart glowed white-hot, unmoored from control, and began to shatter.

Light burst outward.

The dragon screamed as the Heart exploded inside him.

Flame turned inward. Power reversed.

With a thunderous roar that split the mountain, Myruulthar collapsed, his body cracking like porcelain, fire bleeding out in golden veins.

The mountain shook again.

The party scrambled away, dragging the wounded and gasping, as the ceiling began to fall. The last sight of the dragon was of a massive, withered form crumbling into ash and light.

Then silence.

Outside, the wind was clean again.

And the sky, for the first time in a long time, was blue.

The mountain was breaking.

The great chamber where Myruulthar had fallen trembled, its stone cracked from floor to ceiling. The ancient dragon's corpse smoldered in the ruins—its scales dimming, its wings torn to ragged bone, the last remnants of flame bleeding from its ruined chest. But still, faint light pulsed at the core of his broken body.

The Heart of Duramad—shattered, but not dead.

It beat like a dying star.

"It's still alive," Mithri whispered, kneeling beside the glowing fragments.

"No," Eloanil said quietly, stepping forward. "Not for long."

She removed her gloves, hands bare and trembling with exhaustion, and walked to the core of the fallen beast. The divine aura around her had grown—subtle at first, then brighter, a silver light rising from her skin like mist.

"What are you doing?" Burmir said, slumped against a cracked pillar, blood leaking from a gash in his side.

Eloanil looked at him, eyes calm. “Finishing it.”

She knelt, placing both palms on the Heart’s fractured core. She closed her eyes and began to chant—not a battle prayer, but a sealing rite, old and holy. The language was elven, lost in melody and memory, and the glow around her grew stronger, piercing the dark.

“Tel’evar siranthal... finethir nor’lyn… silmara ven.”

The ground split further as she poured her magic into the core. The Heart screamed—a psychic wail of fury and pain, trying to resist.

But it had no power left.

Light cracked across the room in searing lines, racing along the dragon’s body. The corpse shuddered, then crumbled into a torrent of ash and fire, pulled inward as the Heart shrank under Eloanil’s hands, collapsing into itself like a dying sun.

Then—silence.

The light faded.

Eloanil fell back, breathless, sweat on her brow, eyes open but distant. The Heart was gone, sealed in its final breath of divinity.

The mountain groaned one last time.

And the temple collapsed.

The party scrambled out—dragging Burmir, who clung to consciousness with nothing but dwarven spite. Stone crashed behind them. Pillars fell, the great gates splitting apart as they burst out into the open air just as the mountain temple gave in, sinking inward in a great roar of dust and broken time.

They lay there in the snow and silence, chests heaving, the wind clean, the sky clear.

Burmir coughed and looked to Eloanil. “You didn’t blow us up. That’s something.”

She gave a faint smile. “Just barely.”

Hager rolled onto his back, arms wide, laughing hoarsely. “We lived.”

Mithri nodded, eyes on the horizon. “And it’s done.”

The Heart was no more. The dragon was dead. And the fire that sought to rule the realms had gone out at last.

They didn’t speak for a long while.

They didn’t need to.

Weeks passed.

The mountain temple became a grave beneath the snow, a place spoken of only in quiet tones by those who knew the true price of peace. Word of the party's deeds spread like spring wind across the North—carried by wandering bards, grateful traders, and half-scared soldiers who claimed to have seen the fire die with their own eyes.

At first it was whispers.

Then it was meetings.

The dwarves of the Lost Peaks—hearing that one of their own had stood against the rising of old evils—sent envoys with axes lowered and banners raised high. The elves of the High Forest, long wary of mountain folk, came as well, led by druids and ancient archers, speaking words of gratitude for the sealing of the Heart.

For the first time in memory, stone and root sat together, drinking bitter mead and sweet berry wine under shared tents, trying not to kill each other when the old grudges bubbled up.

And in the middle of it all, whether he wanted to be or not, Burmir became a name of weight.

At a great gathering hall built from pine and iron, dwarven elders and battle-masters raised their mugs high and called for him.

"Burmir of Llorkh!" they roared, the hall echoing with the name. "Come forth!"

He did, limping slightly from his still-healing wounds, his beard plaited and his pipe clenched stubbornly between his teeth.

A silver circlet was brought out—simple, but ancient. The mark of a thane, a leader among dwarves in time of need.

An old elder, her face lined as the roots of the mountains, offered it with both hands.

"You have fought with hammer and heart," she said. "You have bound old oaths anew. Will you take the burden of our voice, the shield of our kin?"

The hall grew silent.

Burmir looked at the circlet. Looked at the crowd.

Then, slowly, he puffed once on his pipe, blew a ring of smoke into the air, and chuckled deep in his chest.

"Burden, eh?" he said. "I fought dragons, gods, and my own blasted luck. I think I'd rather fight a pint at the nearest tavern."

Laughter erupted through the hall—loud and booming, shaking the banners on the walls.

The elder smiled, not offended. "Then fight your pint, but know the hearth will always be open."

Burmir grinned wide and turned to where Hager, Mithri, and Eloanil waited by a side door, already waving him over.

"Come on, you lot," he said, clapping Hager hard on the back. "Before they find some other foolish title to pin on me."

They left the hall together—warriors, friends, survivors.

Outside, the mountains stood still and proud, the rivers gleamed under the high sun, and the world, for a while at least, was whole again.

The fire had been beaten.